

# Teaching Design of High School Music Class: Taking Marimba piece “Bamboo Forest” by Keiko Abe as Extended Example

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### Abstract:

This paper is based on the eighth unit of the High School Music Appreciation (Human Voice Edition), focusing on world ethnic music, and takes the marimba work “Bamboo Forest” as an example for music appreciation teaching design. It examines the characteristics of African music culture, the marimba, the compositional background of “Bamboo Forest”, as well as its musical style and performance techniques. This paper addresses the lack of teaching on African music and the marimba in current high school music appreciation courses and proposes an effective teaching strategy that enhances student understanding. It aims to provide new insights into the field of music education.

**Keywords:** marimba, African music, Bamboo Forest

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, music education in China has made great progress, especially after aesthetic education became part of national policy. Students’ interest in music and their ability to understand, express, and create music has improved. High school music appreciation, a compulsory course, currently contains limited teaching on African music and the marimba. This study uses the eighth unit of the People’s Music Publishing House edition of the High School Music Appreciation curriculum — focusing on African music in world ethnic music — and selects the marimba work “Bamboo Forest” as a case study.

African music, known for its complex and diverse rhythms and unique percussion instruments, plays an essential role in global musical culture. The marimba, a pitched percussion instrument with a unique timbre and wide tonal range, is an important element

of the percussion world. “Bamboo Forest”, composed by world-renowned percussionist Keiko Abe, has become widely known for its vivid musical imagery. Abe uses specific performance techniques, such as striking the edges of the marimba bars with mallets, to simulate the sound of bamboo trees swaying in the wind. By analyzing and listening to this work, this teaching approach fosters students’ interest in African music and the marimba while promoting cross-cultural awareness and appreciation [1].

## 2. The Marimba and the Work “Bamboo Forest”

### 2.1 The Marimba as an African Instrument

For the African region, the marimba is a traditional instrument, and African music plays an essential

role in ethnomusicology. However, African music and the marimba are not widely known outside of their native contexts. In China, both are rarely incorporated into music classrooms. Unlike the African drum, the marimba has pitch, providing a rich and varied timbre and tonal range [2, 3, 4].

## 2.2 Keiko Abe’s “Bamboo Forest”

As a celebrated percussionist, composer, and educator, Keiko Abe has significantly contributed to the marimba’s development. Many of her works are used in marimba education and competitions. “Bamboo Forest”, one of her early representative works, incorporates elements of traditional Japanese folk children’s songs and reflects Abe’s distinct musical style. The piece uses bold compositional techniques to depict a lively bamboo forest, symbolizing life’s vitality and Abe’s nostalgia for her childhood [5, 6]. The music of “Bamboo Forest” is characterized by its minor tonality and polyphonic melodic expression. The piece begins softly, gradually increasing in strength and tempo, drawing listeners into the mysterious atmosphere of the bamboo forest. The main melody, built from a rapid sixteenth-note pattern, features a complex interplay between the left and right hands, creating a rich, layered effect. The climax of the piece includes a unique performance technique where the performer strikes the edge of the marimba, imitating the sound of bamboo trees [7, 8].

## 2.3 Performance Techniques in “Bamboo Forest”

The performance of “Bamboo Forest” demands a high level of technical skill, especially in mallet control. Techniques such as continuous running melodic patterns, double-strokes, and rolls are used throughout the piece. The performer must also manage a wide range of dynamics, which tests their control and technical foundation. The use of four mallets requires dexterity in both hands, allowing for smooth melodic transitions and balanced harmonies. In the second half of the piece, the player strikes the marimba’s edges, simulating the sound of bamboo hitting trees — a technique that enhances the atmosphere of the piece [9, 10, 11].

## 3. Instructional Design

### 3.1 Teaching Objectives

The target students are high schoolers using the Human Voice Edition of the High School Music Appreciation textbook. At this stage, students have mastered basic music theory, including the ability to read both simple and

complex musical scores, and some have performance experience. This lesson aims to:

- 1 Introduce African music and the marimba as a unique instrument.
- 1 Develop students’ appreciation of non-Western music.
- 1 Enhance their understanding of musical composition and performance techniques.

### 3.2 Class Design

The lesson begins by creating a musical atmosphere. The concept of world folk music is introduced, and students are encouraged to share their knowledge of different folk music traditions. African music is then presented as the main focus of the lesson. Through audio clips or videos, students are immersed in the rhythm and cultural background of African music.

1 Introduction to the Marimba: After exploring African music, the teacher introduces the marimba. Visual aids, audio clips, and videos are used to familiarize students with the instrument and its role in African music.

1 Exploring “Bamboo Forest”: The teacher guides a discussion on the title “Bamboo Forest”, encouraging students to imagine the atmosphere of a bamboo forest. After playing the marimba piece, students share their initial impressions of its timbre, rhythm, and melody in group discussions.

1 In-depth Musical Analysis: The teacher introduces the composer Keiko Abe, providing background on her life and work. Students listen to the piece in segments, focusing on its timbre, rhythm, and melody, while learning about the unique performance techniques involved.

1 Summary: The lesson concludes with a recap of African music culture, the marimba’s characteristics, and its significance in African music. The teacher may introduce other marimba pieces or African music examples to further broaden students’ knowledge.

## 4. Conclusion

Through this teaching approach, students gain an understanding of African music and the marimba’s role within it. By appreciating “Bamboo Forest”, students learn about the composition’s background, musical style, and performance techniques, deepening their knowledge of the marimba. This approach improves students’ music appreciation skills, sparks interest in African music, and enhances their overall musical literacy.

The use of listening, analysis, and discussion helps students explore and express themselves, allowing them to experience the beauty of music. By focusing on African music and the marimba, this teaching design encourages students to explore non-Western music traditions, expand-

ing their cultural and musical horizons. This paper aims to contribute to music education by proposing a practical and effective teaching method that addresses the current lack of focus on non-Western music in high school curricula.

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