



AFRICAN MUSIC

Much African music is very traditional and has been handed down from father to son. Going to an African music concert is much different from going to a classical concert. At an African music concert the audience will join in by clapping, singing or playing an instrument, rather than just sitting and listening to the music quietly. African music sounds very different from European classical music. Although it is nearer to popular music styles, it still seems very unusual to western ears.

African drums are more complex than those found in Europe. Western music is usually played with the same rhythm throughout the piece. African music, however, is often played with a number of rhythms at the same time. This is known as a polyrhythmic style of music.

At the heart of African singing is the “call and response” style. In this style a group of singers might sing a line which is repeated or answered by a soloist. African singers also like to put a lot of emotion into their performances as if they were acting a part. They like to shout words and male singers enjoy using their highest register known as falsetto.

African instruments are often made from plants and animal products such as hide and bone. African musicians are very fond of percussion instruments and use a wide variety of drums, clappers, scrapers, gongs and xylophones. Perhaps the most famous African percussion instrument is the “talking drums”. By loosening or tightening the cord around the body of these drums variations in pitch can be produced which are so subtle they sound like the human voice. Stringed instruments such as bows, lyres, lutes, zithers and harps are popular as well as wind instruments like whistles, reed pipes, trumpets and horns.



Since the 1980's there has been a growing interest in African music from amongst American and English record buyers. Musicians such as Youssou N'Dour from Senegal and Hugh Masekela now have an international reputation. Interest in African music received a considerable boost when Paul Simon worked with a number of African musicians on his 1987 'Graceland' album. In 1994 Youssou N'Dour achieved a number 4 hit in the U.K. charts with “Seven Seconds”. Inevitably this was achieved by mixing African music with more westernised sounds.

Answer the following questions in sentences. _____

1. Compare the reaction of an African audience to the music with that of a western audience attending a classical concert.
2. Explain what the following words mean polyrhythmic falsetto.
3. Finish this sentence. In the call and response singing
4. Write three lists of African instruments under the following headings - percussion, string and wind.
5. What are many African instruments made of?
6. Explain how African talking drums are able to copy the sound of the human voice.
7. How did Paul Simon encourage interest in African music?
8. Imagine you are an African musician who wants to be a chart success in England. Suggest how you might make your music commercial. Think about technology, instruments, melody and vocals.