

About The Marimba

The marimba is at once one of the oldest and one of the newest musical instruments. While the first concerto for marimba and orchestra wasn't composed until 1935 (by American Paul Creston), the marimba dates back thousands of years and may actually be the oldest musical instrument known to man.

A seven-note lithophone, or "stone marimba," was discovered in Vietnam in 1949 by French pre-historian Georges Condominas. It is estimated to be 5,000 years old, which makes it the oldest-known musical instrument specimen in the world. The bars of this marimba-like instrument, which range from 40 to 26 inches in length, were perfectly tuned to a Javanese pentatonic scale by the deliberate chipping and flaking of some ancient instrument maker. Similar instruments have also been found in the burial chambers of Egypt and in other parts of Africa.

The wooden variety of this family of instruments appears to be indigenous to many primitive cultures in Asia and Africa. The marimba is differentiated from the xylophone-like instruments by the addition of a separate acoustic amplifier for each note. The idea of adding an identically tuned hollowed out gourd or other vessel to amplify and enrich each tone bar of the instrument was a stroke of genius of some unidentified primitive mind.

It appears that the marimba came to Central and South America with the slave trade, bypassing Europe until North Americans brought the instrument to the Continent sometime in the second decade of the 20th century. For this reason, the great European master composers were unaware of the marimba. The xylophone had a separate development in Europe, played by roving Gypsy musicians and eventually making its orchestral music debut in 1874 in Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*.

The evolution of the marimba from a lap-held, crudely tuned instrument of a few notes to today's 5-octave version with tunable metal resonators and rosewood bars, came about strictly in the Americas. The change from one diatonic to two chromatic rows of tone-bars, arranged like a piano, was the contribution of Sebastian Hurtado, a Guatemalan, in about 1880. The perfection of the tuning of the bars, the addition of metal tubular resonators for greater volume, and the concept of tunable resonators for weather compensation were all accomplished in North America.

The vibraphone (or "vibes"), the jazzy little cousin of the marimba, is also an American invention (1916), and is distinguished by aluminum-alloy bars and a pedal system designed to dampen the long-ringing bars. The vibraphone is often fitted with an electric fan-like mechanism in the tops of the resonator tubes, which, when activated, gives the instrument a steady vibrato. Other instruments in the keyboard percussion family are the xylophone (essentially a small, high-pitched, brilliantly brittle-toned marimba – with or without resonators); the glockenspiel or orchestra bells (small steel bars and narrow, very high-pitched range); and chimes or tubular bells (long tubes of special brass alloy, tuned to imitate church bells or carillon).