

Dedication
To the beautiful,
brilliant children
of Miathene Synod,
Kenya.



A Musical Journey to Kenya

How It All Started

I am, among other things, a children's minister at First United Methodist Church (FUMC) in Fort Worth, Texas. From time to time a missionary would come speak to our congregation about a recent mission trip to Africa. We would hear stories of orphans, disease, and third-world poverty. But there were always stories of hope, too, and of how people could make a difference. Every time I would hear those stories, I would shake my head and think, "I ought to go and do something!" But then a few weeks would go by, and I would come up with all the reasons why I couldn't go.

One summer another missionary came and spoke. I don't know if I'd reached some emotional critical mass, but something inside me said, "Enough. I'm going. That's all there is to it!" I met with our church's director of outreach, Nancy Tully. I told her that I wanted to go to Africa, but I didn't know where, and I didn't know what I'd do. First we talked about what I could do. Well, I couldn't cure diseases or eradicate hunger or poverty. One of the best things Nancy did was to encourage me to think about my gifts—what I know how to do well. That, she said, was how I could best make a difference. Well, I know music, and I know kids. That was the first spark of what would later become the Music Academy, Miathene Synod.

The next thing Nancy did was to help me focus. A lot of people at FUMC were feeling inspired to do something in Africa, and like me, they were overwhelmed by the scope of it all. Africa is an enormous continent with many diverse countries, each with unique and very real needs. Nancy suggested that we all focus on one particular country and on one area within that country. We wouldn't be able to do everything for everybody, but perhaps we could make a difference for some. She put me in contact with Daniel and Stella Mwiti, a couple who were living and studying in Fort Worth for a year. Daniel and Stella are from the Meru region in Kenya, where they serve the Kenyan Methodist Church. In Kenya, the Methodist Church is divided into many regional conferences called synods, and each synod is made up of about 150 churches. Both Daniel and Stella serve the Miathene Synod, the center of which is the small rural village of Kianjai. The head of Miathene was Bishop John Kobia Ataya. He, Daniel, and Stella loved the idea of a music academy, and together we helped shape what it was to become.

The music academy would be for sixty children between the ages of eight and twelve. (I would later learn the significance of the number sixty.) It would take place over ten days in August. Schoolchildren in Kenya get three months off from school—December, April, and August—and August was the month that worked the best for Kenyans and Americans alike.

Following were the primary goals of that first music academy:

1. Form a sixty-voice choir of children from throughout the area that could sing for concerts, services, festivals, and other special gatherings.
2. Teach and reinforce vocal health and solid vocal technique. Many of the children sing with a pushed, throaty sound. While this makes for a very exciting sound, it has long-term side effects on the voice. We wanted to teach the children to keep the sound exciting, yet healthy and well-supported.
3. Teach music reading and writing, including rhythmic dictation, solfège, note names, and music terminology.
4. Share some of the most recent research in music education with the teachers and choir directors there.
5. Enable the teachers and children to continue their musical growth by hand delivering dozens of music books, music games, recorders, guitars, and other materials.

Lillian Nkirote, a ten-year-old girl in the music academy, taught me this song about a silly bird. This is one of the more popular songs in the area of Kenya where we were teaching. Children and adults alike can sing it in its entirety. Don't be intimidated by the Kimeru lyrics. This song has a lot of repetition.

This song was originally sung to me in E major. I raised it to G major so that it could easily be played on the recorder.

Kanyoni Kanja

The Silly Bird

Kenyan Folk Song

As sung by Lillian Nkirote, age ten

$\text{♩} = 104$



Ka - nyo-ni ka - nja, ka - nyo-ni ka - nja, ka - wi - re
Sil - ly lit - tle bird, sil - ly lit - tle bird fell down as

nthi na mi - the - ko. Ka - ra - u - ga u - ti so - re, ka -
it be-gan to laugh. The bird would-n't a-pol - o - gize, the

ra - u - ga u - ti so - re, u - ti so - re wa - ti - nda kuu.
bird would-n't a-pol - o - gize. Oh, bird, wher - ev - er have you been?

"Nda ti - nda i - ru - ri, Nda ti - nda i - ru - ri, ku - ra - ga -
"I've been scat - ter-ing seeds, I've been scat - ter-ing seeds through-out the

nia mbi - ri - gi - ci. Ooh mbi - ri - gi - ci, ooh mi - ri - gi - ci ka-mu-kwa -
mar - ket-place to - day. Oh, so man - y seeds, oh, so man - y seeds, but I have

cii ka - re - me - ra ki - tha - ti - ne ki - ncii, ki - ncii, ki - ncii."
brought a bas - ket back that's full of fruits to make a - mends, ki - ncii."

Pronunciation Guide

Kanyoni kanja, kanyoni kanja, kawire nthi na mitheko.
 kah-NYOH-nee kah-NJAH kah-NYOH-nee kah-NJAH kah-WEE-reh nthee nah mee-THEH-koh
 Silly little bird, silly little bird fell down as it began to laugh.

Karauga uti sore, karauga uti sore,
 kah-rah-OO-gah OO-tee SOH-reh kah-rah-OO-gah OO-tee SOH-reh
 The bird wouldn't apologize, the bird wouldn't apologize.

uti sore watinda kuu.
 OO-tee SOH-reh wah-TEE-ndah koo
 Oh, bird, wherever have you been?

"Nda tinda iruri, Nda tinda iruri, kuragania mbirigici.
 ndah TEE-ndah ee-ROO-ree ndah TEE-ndah ee-ROO-ree koo-rah-gah-NYAH mbee-ree-GHEE-shee
 "I've been scattering seeds, I've been scattering seeds throughout the marketplace today.

Ooh mbirigici, ooh mbirigici kamukwacii karemera
 oh mbee-ree-GHEE-shee oh mbee-ree-GHEE-shee kah-moo-kwah-SHEE kah-reh-MEH-rah

kithatine kincii, kincii, kincii."
 kee-thah-TEE-neh kee-NSHEE kee-NSHEE kee-NSHEE

Oh, so many seeds, oh, so many seeds, but I have brought a basket back that's full of fruits to make amends, *kincii*."



Good intonation isn't about tricks, it's about energy.

Between our two trips, we worked with the children for five and a half hours for fifteen days and I can count *on one hand* the total number of times that the children ever sang flat! Keep in mind that we didn't have any accompanying instruments, save for a guitar to play chords for one song. Otherwise, the only pitched instrument that we used was a tenor recorder to give starting pitches.

The children simply didn't go flat. We didn't have to do the whole "raise your eyebrows" bit or tell anyone, "Big steps up and little steps down." Fast or slow, loud or soft, as long as the energy was there, the intonation was there. One of our biggest responsibilities as teachers was to do everything we could think of to keep the energy level up. We kept things moving along without rushing. We had frequent breaks. We allowed, and encouraged, the children to move. We kept the songs and music activities varied. We had fun. We made time to laugh and play. We stayed positive. We made the rehearsal space a safe place where the children could try new things and make mistakes free from judgment. When we came to the end of the last session each day, the kids wanted to keep going.

Kenyan Rhythms

Rhythm is a vital element in Kenyan music. While the drumming isn't as elaborate as it is in many West African cultures, it is still an important presence in ritual, song, and dance. In fact, one of the aspects of Kenyan music that I find amazing is how much can be done with relatively few instruments. We attended many dances, choral presentations, and worship services where one person, playing a single, modest drum, sounded like an entire percussion ensemble.

Included here are three of the basic rhythms we heard many times while in Kenya.

Kenyan Rhythm for One Drum

Consider having one student play this rhythm to accompany the singing of one of the songs in this collection.



$\text{♩} = 120$
side of drum with stick

Hand Drum $\frac{2}{2}$

center of drumhead with hand

The musical notation is written on a single staff with a 2/2 time signature. It begins with a half note, followed by a dotted half note, then a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note. This is followed by a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note. The pattern then repeats: a half note, a dotted half note, a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note, followed by a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note. The piece ends with a double bar line.

You could also teach this rhythm to the entire group using body percussion. Pat the chest to serve as the center of the drumhead. Pat the tummy for the side of the drum.

Kenyan Rhythm for Two Instruments

This rhythm is in $\frac{3}{4}$ but still leads off with that characteristic dotted pattern heard all over the region. (After returning to the United States, it took me two weeks to get that dotted rhythm out of my head!) Three-four time was not very common in our experiences in Kenya. But it did make an occasional appearance, often as a section within the context of a longer song in $\frac{1}{4}$ time.

$\text{♩} = 120$

Shakers $\frac{3}{4}$

Hand Drum $\frac{3}{4}$

The musical notation is written on two staves. The top staff is for Shakers and has a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a dotted half note, followed by a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note. This pattern repeats four times. The bottom staff is for Hand Drum and also has a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a dotted half note, followed by a half note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter note. This pattern repeats four times. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Divide the students into two groups to play the different parts.

Start this rhythm by having the students with the shakers play the steady pulse. Encourage the students to keep the beat nice and even. Don't speed up or slow down. Then invite the students with the drums to play their rhythm. Once again, remind the students not to rush.

Making a Muriempe

A *muriempe* is a medium-size drum that is cone shaped and has one drumhead. The body of the drum is a thin wooden shell, and the head is made of animal skin. It is played with one stick and one hand.

These instructions are for a small version of the drum.

To make one small *muriempe*, you will need:

- ◆ one large plastic cup (like the souvenir cup you might get at a sporting event)
- ◆ one medium-size latex balloon (approximately sixteen inches)
- ◆ scissors
- ◆ colored duct tape
- ◆ colored electrical tape
- ◆ a hacksaw or utility knife



Process

1. Use the hacksaw or utility knife to cut off the bottom of the plastic cup. You should have a cone-shaped plastic body that is open at both ends.
2. Use the colored duct tape to cover up the cut edge and make it safe.
3. Next, cover the entire outside of the cup with a layer of duct tape. Duct tape comes in many different colors, even camouflage.
4. Now use a different color of electrical tape to make a design over the layer of duct tape. The design can be as simple as stripes, rings, or a zigzag pattern. By the way, tape works so much better than trying to cover the cup with construction paper. And it's a lot less messy than painting.
5. Next, inflate the balloon to its full capacity, then let the air out. This will stretch the balloon.
6. Cut the top 60 percent off the balloon. This will be the drumhead.
7. Stretch the drumhead over the top end of the cup. Because the balloon material is pretty strong, and some souvenir cups can be made of pretty thin plastic, the cup may warp at first. If you even out the tension all the way around, the cup should return to its circular shape. You do not need to fasten the drumhead with tape. The tension alone is enough to hold it in place. And remember, the drumhead is a cut-up balloon. It won't last forever. If the drumhead isn't taped to the cup, it will be easier to replace when it breaks. The tighter you make the drumhead, the higher the pitch will be.

You can play the drum with hands alone. Or you can play with a bare hand on the drumhead and a drumstick on the side. An unsharpened pencil with a big rubber eraser on the end makes a nice, and certainly easy-to-find, drumstick.

For the best sound, the drum should be lifted off the ground and either held in one's lap or placed on a drum stand of sorts.

You can make larger drums using anything from plastic trash cans to plastic buckets. The bigger the drum body, the bigger the balloon needs to be. I made a drum using a plastic Halloween candy bucket as the body, and I needed a thirty-six-inch balloon for the drumhead.

This is an easy and fun activity to do with your students. However, I recommend cutting all the cups yourself in advance, as well as sealing off the cut edges with tape.

And be aware that some students may have latex allergies. One way to adapt is to use the duct tape to fashion a drumhead. You can lay pieces of tape over the top of the cup until you have completely covered the opening. If you make a drumhead this way, I do recommend securing it in place with a ring of tape all the way around the top of the cup on the side.