

Music Fundamentals

Introduction

In this chapter I'll introduce some of the fundamentals of West African music, including several important bell parts and how to feel them, plus some instrument names and other musical terminology. Within the scope of this book, I can present a basic overview in very simple terms, but remember that this is an oral tradition with a great degree of subtlety which Western musical terminology and notation cannot adequately convey. If there are live classes available in your area in any style of African music or dance, I hope you'll take advantage of them. The more dancing, playing and listening you do, especially in the presence of experienced and helpful teachers, the more it will all make sense to you.

The Instruments

There are an amazing variety of instruments in daily use in West Africa, but for the purposes of this book we need only introduce the instruments commonly used for music making among the *Ajlo-Eve*. Let's start with what I call the *Standard Eve Drum Set*, which includes these instruments:

- **atsimevu** – This is the lead drum of the *Eve* set. Largest of the *Eve* drums, it has a long thin body with an open bottom and rests diagonally on a wooden stand called *vudetsi*. It's played with two sticks, two hands, or hand and stick.
- **sogo** – A teardrop-shaped drum with a solid bottom. Sometimes used as the lead drum, it normally plays supporting parts to the *atsimevu's* lead. As a lead drum, it's played with two sticks, two hands or stick and hand, just like *atsimevu*. As a supporting drum, it's usually played with two sticks, sometimes with two hands, but it still plays a strong leadership role in the ensemble.
- **kidi** – The middle-sized supporting drum of the *Eve* set, it's similar in construction to *sogo* but smaller and higher pitched. This drum is always played with two sticks. *Sogo* and *kidi* often play the same supporting parts and change patterns together in response to lead drum calls, but in some music they play different patterns which are highly interdependent (neither part is quite complete without the other to support it).
- **kagaŋu** – Smallest drum in the *Eve* set, it is thin with an open bottom, similar to *atsimevu* but much smaller and pitched higher than *kidi*. Two thin sticks are slapped against the head to make a high crying sound which cuts above the entire ensemble. *Kagaŋu* usually fills in the off-beats with a pattern that, unlike the other supporting drums, does not change in response to lead drum calls (although experienced players often improvise *kagaŋu* variations).

- **ganʎkogui** – Hand forged by *Eve* blacksmiths, these iron double-bells are the essential timekeepers in *Eve* music. In nearly every *Eve* musical ensemble, one *ganʎkogui* plays the basic bell pattern around which the rest of the music is structured. The bell almost never changes throughout a musical section. It is usually played with a single stick and can produce both a high and low pitch.
- **axatse** – A hand rattle made from a dried gourd, perhaps 5 or 7 inches in diameter, with seeds or beads woven around it on a string net. *Axatse* is usually played along with *ganʎkogui* to form a musical backdrop for singing and/or drumming. Performances feature at least one *axatse* and sometimes as many as 30 or more, depending on the style of music.
- **akpe** – Wooden clappers held in the hands. Several singers may play these while singing to reinforce the rhythmic hand clapping which is also common at performances. In a musical style known as *akpevu* (clapper music), a large number of clappers replace the usual crowd of *axatse* for a distinct musical texture (a few *axatse* play along with them, but they are not as prominent).

In addition to these standard instruments, some other drums and bells are added to the ensemble at various times. These are:

- **kloboto, totodzi** – Smaller and larger versions of the same instrument, they are both short and stout cylindrical drums with an open bottom, producing a deep weighty sound. The two drums replace *sogo* in the standard *Eve* set during *Agbeko* music, and are featured in other music as well. They are always played with two sticks.
- **agboba** – This drum is a much larger version of the cylindrical *kloboto* and *totodzi* drums. Held diagonally on a stand just like *atsimevu*, it can be used as a lead drum (played with fat sticks as in *Gahũ*) or a supporting drum (played with hands to enrich the musical texture as in *Kinka*). Its open bottom and large head area give it an incredible booming bass sound.
- **atoke** – These boat-shaped iron bells (they look like an iron taco shell) are held in the open palm or curled fingers of a hand and struck with an iron striker, producing a high ringing sound that cuts through everything else. A pair of *atoke* tuned a third or more apart sometimes replaces *ganʎkogui* in a musical ensemble, or is added to a group of *ganʎkogui* bells to form a *gamemlã* bell orchestra to accompany *Hatsiatsia* songs.
- **adodo** – Two clusters of small iron bells forged onto both ends of a sturdy iron rod. Because of the sound they produce, they are sometimes described as iron rattles rather than bells. They are carried and shaken in some of the more sacred musical traditions, especially by members of the *Yeve* religious cult. Several played together makes a heavenly noise to accompany sacred drums or singing.

Section Names and Other Useful Terms

The classical music of Western Europe follows standard guidelines of form which have allowed a vocabulary of commonly understood musical terms to evolve; for example, words like *Adagio*, *Andante*, and *Allegro* refer to specific sections of music within a

larger work, as well as suggest the tempo and mood of those sections. This is also true of classical *Anlo-Eve* music; words like *Uulɔɔ*, *Hatsiatsia*, and *Uutsɔtsoe* refer to musical sections and also suggest something of the tempo and mood in which they are performed. As with their Western counterparts, these terms don't imply that every musical style follows the same structure or uses the same section names, but it does represent a large body of common practice and terminology that is useful to know about.

Uulɔɔ is the slow processional section of a performance. The performers dance, drum and sing their way through town, the drums carried on the heads of the shorter and/or younger performers as they are played. When they arrive at the designated performance arena, the performers may continue with *Uulɔɔ* for some time, or they may go on to something else. Sometimes there is no procession, but *Uulɔɔ* is still performed in place to attract a crowd and warm up performers for the faster sections to come. *Uutsɔtsoe* is the subsequent fast section, often the main attraction at a performance. It may be similar to the *Uulɔɔ* that precedes it in terms of instruments and musical texture, but is usually much faster and with a different repertoire of music and dance movements.

Most traditions also have *Hatsiatsia* sections, during which the most elaborate songs are sung with only a few bells or rattles as accompaniment. *Hatsiatsia* songs are sometimes the most artistic and original offerings of the performance. They may also feature simple drum accompaniment, even stylized gestures or dance movements – but the songs are always the center of attention. A *gamemlã* ensemble may accompany the *Hatsiatsia* songs; this is a small group of *ganʒkogui* and *atoke* bells playing carefully composed parts which interlock with each other to form a beautifully ornate ostinato background.

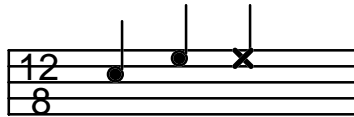
In religious music, *Ago* sections are slow processions similar to *Uulɔɔ*, but with the implication of a spiritual consecration. The word *ago* suggests knocking on a door, as though the congregation were humbly scratching at the entrance to the spirit world, asking permission to enter. Another term which may be confused with this is *Adzo*. This is a kind of stripped-down traditional jam session, music played on traditional instruments but with some parts missing. At least one writer has used *Adzo* as a musical section name, referring to the stop-and-start dance interjections of *Agbekɔ*, but as far as my informants are concerned this is not an appropriate use of the term.

Finally, you'll encounter the word *atsiã* a lot in this book. It can mean several things, but it's most often translated as *style* in English. In a dance which consists of several short episodes which display distinct dance movements or "styles," each episode is called an *atsiã*. In music with several larger sections, like *Adzohũ*, there may be one section called *Atsiã* in which many individual *atsiãwo* (plural) are performed consecutively. It may also refer to an entire style of dance-drumming; *Atsiagbekɔ* is another name for the *Agbekɔ* dance, meaning the "Agbekɔ style" of dancing. If that isn't confusing enough, there are dances known only as *Atsiã*, but which are identified by the region in which they are performed. A section of this book documents songs from the *Atsiã* dance performed among the *Anlo-Eve* of Anyako – but there are other *Atsiã* dances performed elsewhere in Eveland which are completely different.

Basic Bell and Clapper Technique

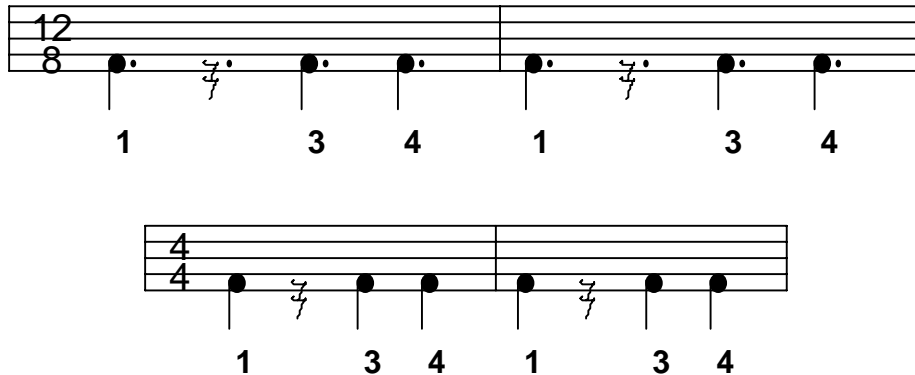
In all of these traditions, the bell is the foundation and heartbeat of every musical composition. Everything that happens musically, happens in relation to the bell. The bell plays unwaveringly throughout a musical section and its part never changes; it can't change, because without it the other parts would cease to make sense. Within one dance there may be several musical sections, each using a different bell. Or, different sections may use the same bell but at different tempos. This adds variety to performances, since different bells create very different musical textures. The first step towards hearing any style correctly is to learn its bell, and especially how to feel it in the proper orientation.

Usually the main bell is played on *ganjokogui*, an iron double bell which can play two distinct pitches. There are three strokes you should know how to play, and they are notated as follows:



The first note is an open strike of the *lowest* pitched bell, and the second is an open strike of the *highest* bell. The third note is a pressed strike to the high bell; the stick strikes the bell but instead of bouncing right off, it presses gently but firmly into the bell to produce a high-pitched *ting* sound.

Beneath the notation of each bell, I also indicate where the fundamental beats of the music are. This is how it looks, both in 12/8 and in 4/4 time:



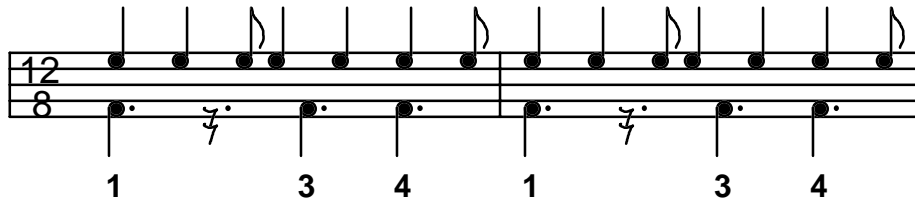
There's a very good reason why these beats are included. Knowing how to play the bell is not enough to understand it; you must also feel it in the proper orientation. I teach a technique called *3-4-1* (for lack of a better name) which helps give students the proper feel for the music. Almost every bell, both in 4/4 and 12/8 time, is built around four fundamental beats. That is, you should be able to clap four evenly spaced beats for every one bell cycle. That's just what I have my students do, but I ask them to play the 2nd beat *subjectively* (feel a beat but don't actually clap). This leaves them clapping just the 3-4-1 pulses but *feeling* all four beats, which is closer to the way the music is supposed to be perceived.

All strokes on the bell and clapper should maintain the same volume – there are no accented beats in this music – but there *should* be a constant sense of grounding weight on the main musical beats. Clappers must feel 3-4-1 as a cycle which both begins and ends at 1, but with no variation in volume or intensity. This was actually taught to me as a metaphysical principle – the infinite circle of life, each ending is another beginning – but that kind of subtlety is unfortunately beyond the scope of this book. If you learn to clap the 3-4-1 with each of these bells as I’ve described, you will be off to a good start.

Basic Eve Bell

By far the most popular bell in Eveland is what I will call the *Basic Eve Bell*, which sounds like this:

Basic Eve Bell (2 cycles)



This bell is at the heart of most *Eve* music and dance. Its apparent simplicity is deceptive; it is an ingenious and highly versatile invention which has inspired countless amazing musical creations for hundreds of years. In this book alone, you’ll encounter it in the music of *Adzohũ*, *Atsiã*, *Afãvu*, *Agbadza*, *Agbeko*, *Atsiã*, *Gadzo*, *Takaqa*, *Agovu* and *Sogba*.

Mathematically, the Basic Eve Bell is built on the same principles of physics as the Western chromatic scale (the 12 notes of the piano keyboard). In fact, if you play all twelve notes starting from C, in straight time and with a strong accent on each white key, you will discover that the Basic Eve Bell is none other than our own major diatonic scale – but the notes are defined by their relationship in time, not frequency. In fact, *Eve* composers primarily do with *polyrhythm* (multiple beats played together, related in time) what Western composers do with *polyphony* (multiple notes playing together, related in pitch). Cross-rhythms played across the Basic Eve Bell to build and release tensions and create emotional moods are the equivalent, both artistically and mathematically, of chords and pitch intervals used to do the same thing.

It’s very important for you to feel this bell correctly. Once you get comfortable playing the bell part, experiment with playing the 3-4-1 along with it (maybe tap your foot or cluck your tongue on 3-4-1). Learning to play the bell with a 6-beat feeling is not too difficult, but the main feel of the bell is in 4 (as you can see from the 3-4-1 notes on the bottom). Actually, the ideal is to feel both 6 and 4 simultaneously, but to keep 4 as the stronger of the two. You should also try playing just the 6 over 4 feel for awhile, giving each hand one of the parts and slapping them on your lap or a table top. The 6 and 4 together look like this:

Six Over Four Polyrhythm (2 cycles)

When you can play these two rhythms simultaneously, try playing the Basic Ebe Bell again and tapping out either the 6 or 4 feel along with it. When you can do either one with ease, you've got a good solid start on understanding the bell.

Other Bells in 12/8 Time

Every other bell in 12/8 time is really just a variation of the Basic Ebe Bell. They may seem radically different at first, but as you learn more about them you'll see that they work in pretty much the same way. The faster bells (*Ago*, *Husago*, *Afouu*) are easier to feel in 2 rather than in 4; instead of feeling the count as ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR, try feeling ONE-AND-TWO-AND instead.

Adzohũ Kadodo Bell (1 cycle)

Adzohũ Ago Bell (1 cycle)

Husago Bell (4 cycles)

Afouu Bell (2 cycles)

Bells in 4/4 Time

These bells have a completely different feel to them, but there is still a solid 3-4-1 running through them. With some of the bells, you can't tell where 3-4-1 is by listening to the bell alone – but an experienced musician can hear it in the other parts being played. On the CD, listen carefully for the clapper, which is played clearly to allow you to find your orientation at all times.

Kinka Bell (4 cycles)

Souu Bell (4 cycles)

Gahū Bell (2 cycles)

Bells in 7/4 Time

Remember when I said that *almost* every bell is built around four fundamental pulses? Well, here's an exception. The *Bawa* bell actually does line up with a 3-4-1 at some places in the dance – but mostly it seems to have a varying cycle which sometimes has 4 beats, sometimes 6, and sometimes just goes and goes. Of the two *Bawa* songs in this book, only one has a 4-beat feel. The other has a 6-beat feel, so you'd need to clap something like 3-4-5-6-1 instead. For completeness, I've included two notations of the bell, showing both the 3-4-1 and 3-4-5-6-1 feel. Fortunately, the bell itself never changes.

Bawa Bell (3-4-1 feel, 4 cycles)

The notation shows two measures of music on a grand staff. The top staff is in 4/4 time. The bottom staff is in 4/4 time, with a 7/4 time signature indicated below the first measure. The pulse sequence is 1, 3, 4, 1, 3, 4.

Bawa Bell (5-6-1 feel, 6 cycles)

The notation shows two measures of music on a grand staff. The top staff is in 6/4 time. The bottom staff is in 4/4 time, with a 7/4 time signature indicated below the first measure. The pulse sequence is 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6.

By the way, if this bell sounds out of phase to you, in a way you're right; compared to *Kinka*, *Sovu* and *Gahũ* (which are all *Eve* dances), *Bawa* (which is a *Lobi* dance) does have a kind of phase-shifted bell part. Of course, to the *Lobi* it must sound quite natural.

How to Use the Audio CD

Just a few last words about taking best advantage of the audio recording which accompanies this book. The recording was made specifically as a tutorial, not as an authentic representation of traditional African music. There are many musical elements missing entirely so that you can hear the songs and their relationship to the bell clearly. Actual field recordings are great to listen to if you can find them, but it's often impossible to pick out individual voices or instruments for the purposes of learning, especially for beginners.

It wouldn't hurt to start out by listening casually to the CD several times, perhaps while driving to work or polishing your stamp collection. You may learn a few songs all the way through just by listening to them, and you'll get more familiar with the sound and feel of the music. Listen also for differences in the musical styles; each music has a distinct mood and texture.

Before you study a song in more depth, be sure to understand the bell that goes with it. You should be able to clap 3-4-1 along with the song as described previously in this chapter. This will ensure you have the proper orientation. It's difficult at first, but there's a very good reason for doing it. A surprising number of songs are easier to learn in the *wrong* orientation, so new students will try to ignore the bell and follow the path of least resistance. This is a mistake; the songs are much more interesting in the proper feel and they make a lot more sense. Since you may be working without a teacher, it's especially important to check yourself for bad habits, and the 3-4-1 technique is one good way of doing that. If you can't clap 3-4-1 to the song, you are not hearing it correctly (yet).

Once you hear the song in the proper orientation, try humming or singing the melody without words at first. On the CD, I sing the first round of each song without harmony or variation so you can hear the exact melody. Once you've got the feel and the melody, it's just a matter of memorizing some language and you've got a new song in your repertoire. Since you probably don't speak any languages remotely similar to these, memorizing the lyrics will be easier if you look over the word-by-word translations first. Having a few words in your vocabulary makes it feel less like memorizing nonsense syllables.

And if you don't like any of my suggestions, just tear out this section and use it to line your bird cage. Have fun!