Evolution of the Concert Marimba

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About My Research

- January 1999 to October 2006
- 100 hours of interviews
  - Composers, students, colleagues, friends and family
- 400 bibliographic resources
  - Books, Percussive Notes articles, newspaper archives, photographs, recordings, musical scores
- 5 trips to Japan
- Hundreds of hours writing

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What is a Marimba?

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Oldest

Stone-Age 'Marimba' Is Discovered in Vietnam
Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.
New York Times (1857-Current file); Mar 18, 1954; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2001)
pg. 3

Stone-Age 'Marimba' Is Discovered in Vietnam

Rock Plates Pitched in Java Scale May Be 5,000 Years Old

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

PARIS, March 8—French prehistorians are convinced that at least one race of Stone Age men had a well developed ear for music. These Stone Age men played an instrument that looked like a huge marimba made of rock.

An almost perfect example of one of these ancient lithophones has been recovered from the hill regions of Indo-China and reassembled in the Musée de l'Homme here. Another incomplete specimen is being tested. If they are both more than 4,000 or 5,000 years old, as prehistorians believe, they are the oldest known musical instruments in the world. They would be more ancient than the neolithic flutes found in Swiss lake huts and the famous Sumerian lyres unearthed by Sir Leonard Woolley in Chaldean Ur.

The discovery was made by Georges Condominas, an ethnologist in the French Overseas Science Department, who recently returned from a survey of Indo-China.

Heard Natives Talking

His journey took him into the southeastern tributaries of the Mekong River in Darlac Province, Vietnam. One night, at a place called Nhat Lieng Krak (literally the Village of the Protruding Stumps), he heard the natives talking about the "big gray stones." The stones had been unearthed some days previously by a road-making gang.

He visited the site and found eleven stone plates, the biggest of which was forty inches long, six inches wide and two inches thick and weighed about twenty-five pounds. The smallest was approximately twenty-six inches in length.

M. Condominas accidentally struck one of the plates and found that it emitted a sonorous note and vibrated strongly in his hands.

The others also rang loudly when struck. Seven of them were found to be pitched in a complete Eastern or Javanese pentatonic scale. Three other plates formed part of a second scale and were probably part of another instrument. The eleventh stone was broken.

After he had examined the site and made local inquiries, M. Condominas brought the stones back to Paris. There, musicologists reassembled the stones in the way in which it was thought they had been originally played—across two narrow wooden supports like a modern xylophone.

The stones respond to a slight touch. Tunes have been played on them in the museum ranging from fragments of Debussy to "Pop Goes the Weasel."

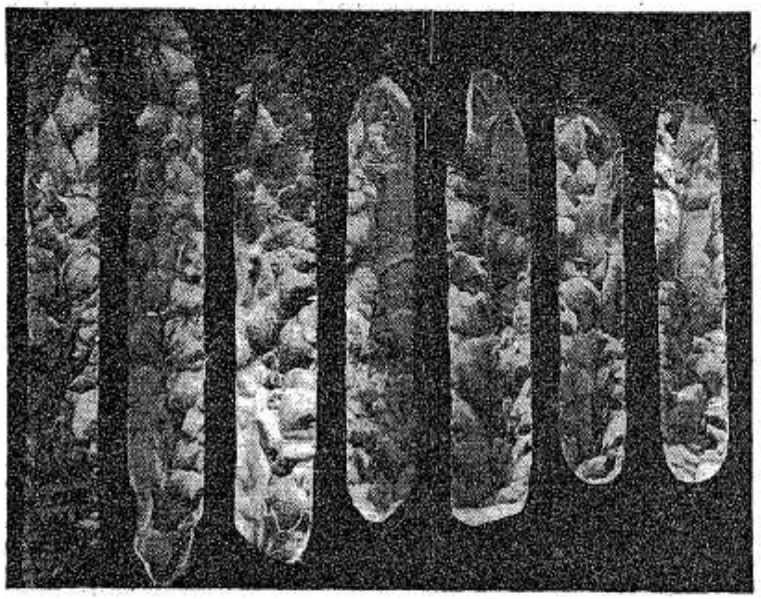
They are composed of a type of rock known as a schist, which was transformed by ancient lavas and earth pressure into a "ringing" or phonolithic state.

Prehistorians have decided that the way in which the stones have been chipped or fashioned is characteristic of a people known as the Bacsonians. They were a tropical race of Stone Age men who made crude tools out of the same schistic type of rock as the lithophones in Indo-China between 4,000 and 5,000, and probably 8,000 or 9,000 years ago.

Although it is thought that the Bacsonians actually made the instruments, nobody knows how they did it. It is believed that they hewed the lithophone plates from solid extrusions of rock and tuned them to a high degree of tonal accuracy by a process of chipping or flaking.

At first it was thought that the core of the plates had been split from the original rock by fire treatment, but physicists concluded that excessive heat would have destroyed the tense musical quality of the stone.

There also is the unsolved problem of the inconstant relationship between the length and weight of the lithophone plates and the notes they emit. The longest and heaviest of them does not give the lowest note. It is considered that pitch and sonority may have resulted from a complex relationship of weight, length, method of chipping and curvature. Some of the plates are slightly bent like a banana.



The New York Times

The ancient lithophone that was found in the hill regions of Indo-China. The seven stones are arranged in ascending tonal order and respond to a slight touch. They are pitched in a complete ancient eastern scale. Another incomplete specimen is being tested.

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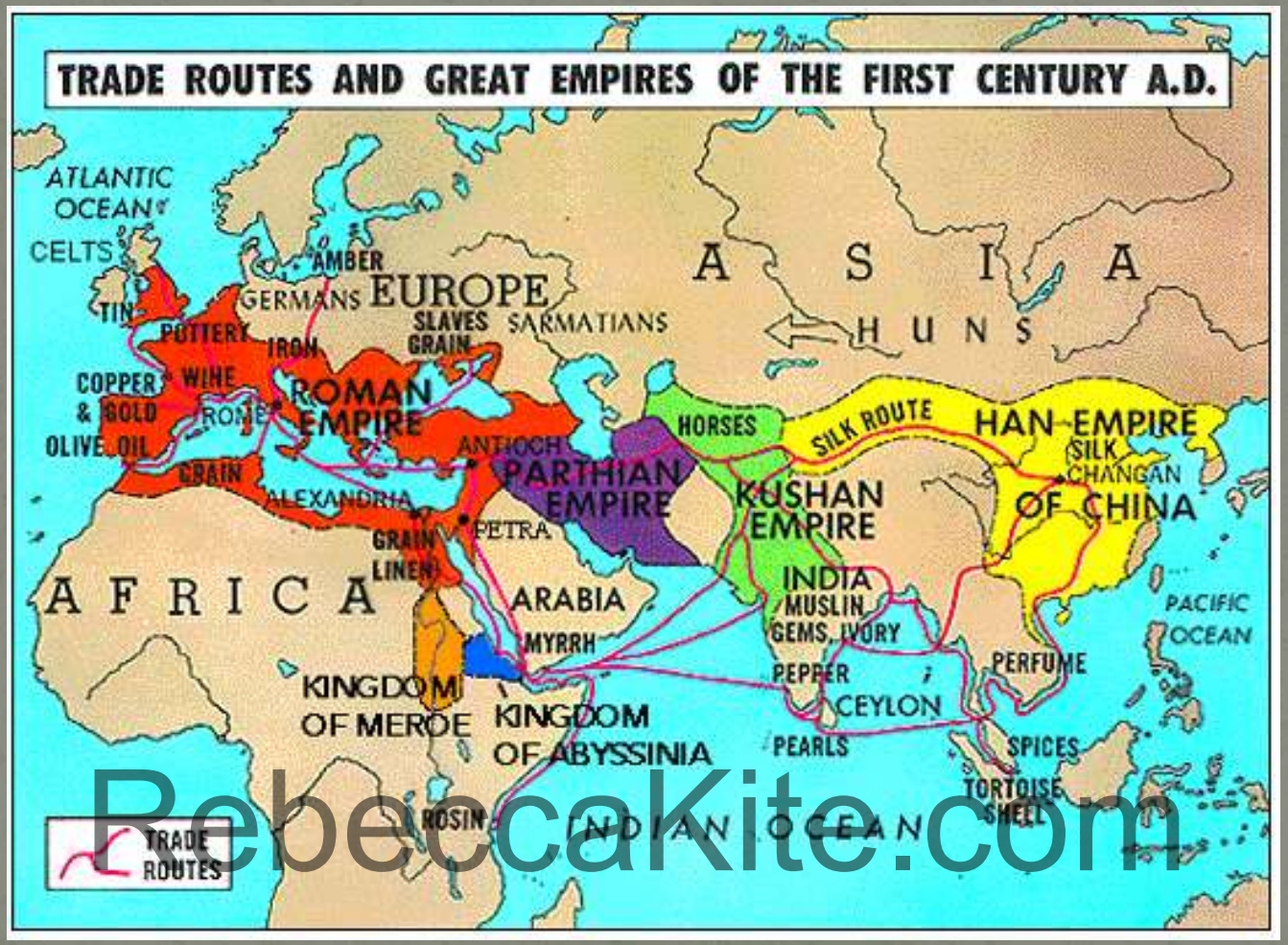
Ancient Trade Routes from Asia to the Mid-East and Eastern Europe



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Asian Trough Xylophone

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One scene from "The Dance of Death" Woodcut Series (1538) by Hans Holbein

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19th Century Xylophone Virtuoso

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Modern African Balafon

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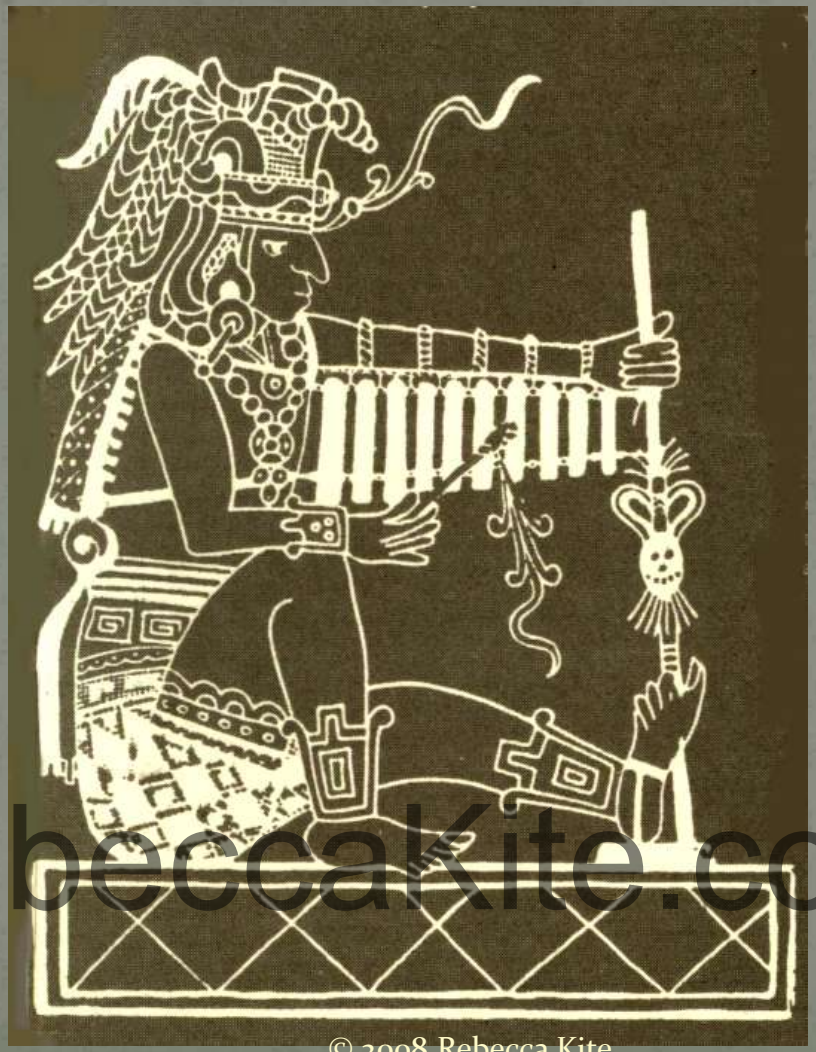
Mayan Xylophone-Like Instrument



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Diatonic Mexican Marimba

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Marimbists in Chiapas, Mexico and Guatemala develop marimba and artistry

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Leedy Xylophone, c. 1900

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Yoiichi Hiraoka –Most Well Known Xylophonist in America 1930-1942

YOICHI HIRAOKA AT HIS INSTRUMENT

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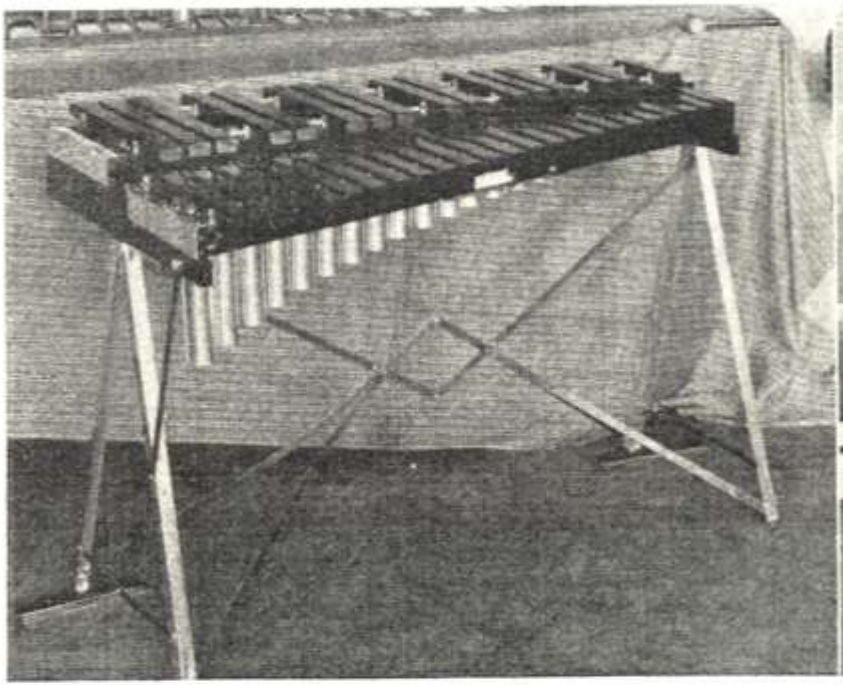
From Etude Magazine, September 1938



A FORM OF MARIMBA, STILL WIDELY USED

MODERN FORM OF MARIMBA IN THE HOME

Marimba Supersedes Xylophone

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In the Ashes of Tokyo after WWII, Keiko Abe Begins Playing the Xylophone

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The First 5 Octave Concert Marimba – The Yamaha YM6000 - 1984

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