Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology 25, 2025
DOI 10.14746/ism.2025.25.7

MARCEL FRĄCKOWIAK
Institute of Musicology, University of Wroclaw
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5687-1819

More Than Instrument: Phenomenon of Valiha

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the *valiha*, a Malagasy tube zither, recognizing it as an anthropological phenomenon – posthumanistically speaking – relational. The *valiha*, Madagascar's traditional and par excellence national musical instrument, is not merely an organological object constituting the material heritage of the Malagasy people. As a human creation, the instrument is not simply a carrier of knowledge about its culture, but an active participant in it, organizing human experience within the framework of social practices related to the transmission of ancestral tradition and adaptation in processes of global changes. Transformations in construction, tuning, and the instrument's function are linked to stabilizations and transformations of social attitudes and values. Inspired by posthumanisms, the article transcends the mind-body and culture-nature divides to rethink the relationship between human and matter. The analysis covers the ontology of the musical instrument, its anthropological-organological evolution, its agency in shaping Malagasy music and identity, and *valiha's* multidimensional instrumentality – musical, cognitive, social, and transcendental.

KEY WORDS: *valiha*, Madagascar, musical instrument, affordance, agency, ethnomusicology

Introduction

This article discusses the *valiha*, a Malagasy tube zither[1], recognizing it as an anthropological phenomenon – in posthumanistic terms – of a relational nature. The *valiha* – Madagascar's traditional and national musical instrument *par excellence* – is not merely an organological object constituting the material heritage of the Malagasy people. As a human creation, the instrument is not only a carrier of knowledge about its culture, but also an active participant in it,

[1] In the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, the *valiha* is assigned the number 312.1 (whole-tube zither) – 312.11 as the traditional idiochord form, and 312.12 as the heterochord form prevalent in contemporary practice.

organizing human experience within the framework of rituals and social practices related to the transmission of traditions inherited from ancestors and adaptation in the process of global change. Transformations in the construction, tuning, or function of the instrument are linked to the stabilization and transformation of social attitudes and values.

In classical ethnomusicological positions (e.g., Merriam, 1964), instruments appear as artifacts of musical culture, elements of an integrated social context, or indices of human musicality, revealing culture, but less attention is paid to the physical aspects of their relationship with humans in a musical context. Blacking's (1973) bodily-cognitive approach is groundbreaking in this regard. Instrumentological analyses, focusing on construction, acoustic properties, or determining historical development paths, isolate them from their full functional context. While they do focus on instruments, the subject of their research remains recognized a priori in terms of a 'musical instrument', and its definition is accepted implicitly – an instrument is simply a 'device made to play music'.

As Johnson and Kvifte note, each element of this definition can be problematized–categories and their conceptual relationships are not universal. Johnson, adopting the assumptions of cultural relativism, argues for the need to shift the analytical framework from the instrument to "the interrelationships between the instrument, performer, and music in the functional environment" (Johnson, 1995, p. 266) – a context that reveals local meanings, allowing for the sensitization of the initial categories (cf. Merriam, 1964). Kvifte, in turn, reveals cognitive boundaries in order to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of the concept of a musical instrument; critiques discourses as practices that produce and reproduce socio-cultural order; the normalization of motifs of pluralism and pragmatism; and the shifting boundaries of agency (2008).

The article addresses the ontology of musical instruments and points to tensions that it treats not as a problem requiring a solution, but as a productive area for anthropological analysis. Musical instruments reveal themselves as an anthropological phenomenon–a kind of extension of humans and a material co-creator–and as such, the *valiha* is further analyzed.

The divergence of the classical scientific perspectives referred to constitutes the legacy of Cartesian thought, its dualisms, fundamentalizing paradigms of representationism, mechanization of nature, and passivity of matter, which simultaneously reinforce an anthropocentric view of the world. In these perspectives, the instrument appears as a passive object of research, whether it is a physical mechanism subjected to all kinds of organological measurements, or an artifact and representation of cultural and anthropological meanings. These perspectives retain their cognitive value – as apparatuses, they produce some kind of knowledge – but they are not necessary a priori, because the division between culture and physicality is arbitrary.

Inspired by posthumanisms (Haraway, 1991; Barad, 2003; Latour, 2005; Ingold, 2007), the interdisciplinary approach to *valiha* will attempt to transcend the separations between mind and body, culture and nature, and rethink the relationship between humans and matter. The fundamental problem will be to

rethink the passivity of objects and the conditions for accepting their performative, unintended agency – which "is simply a property of things that cause change/difference in a specific situation, rather than the result of conscious thought or intention" (Bates, 2014, p. 45).

The article is based on a multidimensional research approach, combining literature on the subject with direct field experience (July 2024): participant observation, analysis of music and its functional contexts, interviews with musicians, including the constructor, Mr. Ratovonirina Ranaivovololona. An important element of my methodological approach was also the practical learning of the instrument, as postulated by Blacking (1955, 1959), which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the specifics of the performance technique and the knowledge that this practice embodies. The awareness of my dual position – as a non-transparent ethnomusicologist and a non-Malagasy musician – forms the basis of the methodological reflection adopted in this study.

The tension-filled ontology of a musical instrument

As an object of cognition, an instrument reveals a fundamental ontic-epistemic tension: it is a physical artifact that simultaneously belongs to a certain conceptual category and a broader epistemological project. It performatively balances between being in itself and being for us. Intuitive recognition (applied to the concrete) is based on mechanisms of representation (see: Nęcka, Orzechowski, Szymura, 2006, pp. 103–126): a set of defining features, but also characteristic and functional features of things – their form, physical properties, acoustic parameters, color, or affordance – simultaneously invokes and exemplifies mental prototypes or ideal types. In practice, these also imply patterns of musical production, roles, meanings emerging from the cultural context, or a pragmatically communicative name, which becomes one of the basic means of identification, let's say "through the sense of the mind"; they are activated multisensorily: "look, this is a *valiha* – listen, hold it, play it..." Form and acoustic function seem to be essentially constitutive of a 'musical instrument'. These are features recognized modally (sensually), but essentialized in culture – the category itself and its boundaries are not discovered but only established in material-discursive practices. Our ontological imagination – the ability to design prototypes, ideal types, and essentializations – is the basis for how we produce, identify, define, and classify instruments, but it reveals the deeply constructive and performative nature of these operations. The *instrumentality* of an instrument stems from its relationship withan embodied subject and its category. Definitions thus always remain influenced by accepted criteria.

Grove's online music dictionary handles this cautiously with the following definition:

> 'Musical instrument' is a self-explanatory term for an observer in his own society; it is less easy to apply on a worldwide scale because the notion of music itself in such a wide context escapes definition (2008 [in:] Kvifte, 2008, p. 45).

Kvifte points out that:

> This definition ties the concept of instrument to the concept of music in a general way, and not explicitly to musical activity. But the main point is that if we cannot agree on what music is, then we cannot agree on what a musical instrument is either (2008, p. 45).

Each of the following definitions will turn out to 'enact' (Barad, 2003) the ontology of the instrument differently – the boundaries of what is an instrument and the aspect of being (substance, function, relation...). They have their practical consequences, their ontological politics (they include something, exclude something, standardize something). Tracing them allows us to notice tensions and paradigm shifts in the study of musical instruments.

Hornbostel proposes an inclusive definition, enacting the function: "For purposes of research everything must count as a musical instrument with which sound can be produced intentionally" (1933, 129, [in:] Kvifte 2008, p. 46). The decisive criterion of this definition is the intention behind the act, which implies latency – an instrument *is* probably anything that a musical person has at their disposal... Lysloff and Matson relocate intentionality, emphasizing it also at the level of construction: "any device or human behavior constructed or carried out for the primary pur-pose of producing sound, whether musical or otherwise" (1985, 217 [in:] Kvifte 2008, p. 46). They limit the substantive aspect, but leave the functional one. Johnson's definition – "an object of material culture that produces sound, used to create humanistically organized sound in a context that is aesthetically separate from everyday behavior" (1995, p. 260) – in turn limits the functional aspect with an aesthetic context, including: "it depends on when, where, and for whom...". Bielawski's definition is noteworthy, in which: "a musical instrument is a transformer that transforms motor gestures, which always arise in time and real space, into musical gestures that take place in musical time and space" (1979, p. 27, [in:] Kvifte, 2008, p. 46) [translation by author]. The author departs from the criteria of intention and substance; he approaches the instrument performatively and relationally, including the performer in the concept and thus dispersing agency. "The instrument does something" – it realizes the musicality of human behavior.

This definition partly reveals the problem of the instrument's boundaries. If the instrument is not just an object, but a relational phenomenon involving the performer's body – where does it begin and end? Where should the boundary be drawn? Kvifte provocatively shifts it:

> It is possible to continue the chain ad absurdum: the fingers are moved by muscles, the muscles get their energy from the metabolism that depends on the food consumed; the production of the food relies on the energy from the sun – and very soon, we are back to the Big Bang as an integral part of the instrument (2008, pp. 48–49).

Such reduction shows that the boundaries of the instrument do not stand before the concept, but emerge with it. If we define spatial boundaries, temporal boundaries will follow – what is an artifact outside of performance? Since boundaries are conventional, they must be pragmatic.

We must maintain a certain hygiene of our cognitive practice – "the usefulness of a concept is not necessarily proportional to its precision. Concepts are tools for grasping the world around us, and their utility in research is measured by their ability to let us make new and relevant questions" (Kvifte, 2008, p. 55).

The concept of an instrument is therefore multidimensional in practice, and the material to which it refers remains in close tension with it – it produces its materiality (stable form, recognizable structure, repeatability). Racy's dialectical perspective summarizes instruments as 'interactive entities' that:

> they are not mere reflections of their cultural contexts, nor are they fixed organological artifacts that can be studied in isolation from other social and artistic domains. Instead, instruments interact dialectically with surrounding physical and cultural realities, and as such, they perpetually negotiate or renegotiate their roles, physical structures, performance modes, sound ideals, and symbolic meanings (Racy, 1994, p. 38, [in:] Kvifte, 2008, pp. 47–48).

Any imagined ontological stability of these objects is, however, the result of the repetition of material and discursive practices. Mechanisms of representation and synecdochical essentialization within categories make the objects belonging to them stable in perception. Thanks to them, we can talk about *valiha* as a phenomenon, recognizing it in artifacts. Intuition is founded on our mental nature and cultural practices, in which matter itself is already entangled – these practices are its configurations – "like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on 'the other side' of materiality, but swim in an ocean of materials" (Ingold, 2007, p. 7). The form of an instrument is not a substance, but a pattern activated in the constant flow of materials.

In relational terms, these entities do not enter into a dialectical relationship, because as such they only 'become', 'emerge' from it (cf. Barad, 2003; Ingold, 2007). A musical instrument does not exist as a thing in itself before its use, nor behind its representations – it is a relational phenomenon, linking subject and matter; an intertwining of fingers, strings, bamboo...

To avoid an impractical reduction, we can venture to say that an artifact *is* a musical instrument, an imagined thing in itself, since something specific can be done with it, but this specific thing is not its essence, but its "affordance" – a relational possibility of action – which, as Gibson explains, "is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective–objective" (1979, 129 [in:] Tullberg, 2022, 8).

This seemingly obvious and self-evident object is the site of fundamental onto-epistemic tensions, the recognition of which opens up new possibilities for anthropological thinking about the relationship between matter, body, music, and meaning. The task of anthropology will not be to decide what *valiha* is – taking it as a phenomenon – but to study these relationships and trace the material and discursive practices that produce it in specific tensions.

Musical instruments as an anthropological phenomenon

Anthropology of music focuses on the fact that significant changes in the genre system, style, musical language, modernization of instruments, and development of performance capabilities are closely related to human existence and determined by modifications of paradigmatic cultural and anthropological conditions. Musical instruments are, in their simplest sense, human tools – temporary or stable arrangements of matter used by humans to produce sounds. The authors of the article A Musical Instrument As an Anthropological Phenomenon argue for their anthropogenesis, anthropomorphic structure, and anthropomorphism in nomenclature – also *valiha* has *loha*, 'head', *vatany*, 'trunk' (Rakotomalala, 1998) and 'foot' or 'tail' – the personification of personal specimens, as well as a specifically humanizing function:

> A musical instrument as an "extension" of the hand, an earpiece, the entire human body, "separating and receding", allows a person to study himself more precisely, more jewelry, in more detail, more objectively at a distance of "viewing from the side" (Chernoivanenko et al, 2023, p. 65).

Of course, 'extension' enacts the boundaries of the instrument between the human body and the foreign body, abstracting from voice or body percussion. Using Heyde's (1975) distinction between anthropomorphic and technomorphic elements of construction, with a consistent division of instruments into: prototypical (having only anthropomorphic elements), typical (combining both elements), and exotypical (having only technomorphic elements), let us assume that we are dealing with typical and exotypical instruments.

These instruments are therefore objects specialized by humans to specialize in music, but more precisely in their own musicality, sound production (we must bear in mind that music is a culturally specific production – we are also talking about drums or bells, which are incorporated into various cultural practices, which "usually occurs in order to intensify their disciplinary influence" (Chernoivanenko et al., 2023, p. 2). They are relics of the expansion and evolution of musical homo faber – its prehistoric cyborgization. Haraway's cyborg (1991) is a metaphor that questions and replaces traditional divisions with relational hybridity, inspiring anthropology to study how technology shapes the human body, mind, and culture, and, very importantly, the distribution of agency. Born (2005), drawing on Gell's theory of Art and Agency (1998) and Gibson's aforementioned theory of affordance, presents musical creation as a process dispersed in time, space, and between human and non-human subjects – digital media that operate in networks of relationships and actively co-create.

Musical instruments should definitely be considered as this type of technology. As early as the 1950s, Blacking (1955, 1959) noted that certain aspects of musical structure result from the relationship between the human body and the instrument –

> [they] are shaped by the interaction between the morphology of a musical instrument and the human body, with its physical structure, physiological control systems, and psychological information-processing capacities" (Baily, 2025, pp. 137–138).

Baily develops his insights by examining what he calls the "human/musical instrument interface". Using the example of Afghan lutes, he shows the influence of the spatial compatibility of this interface – the degree of fit between the layout of the instrument and movement patterns – on cognitive mapping and, as a result, on the musical structure itself. He points to the bidirectional causality of the relationship between instrument and music – the instrument shapes the music, but instruments are modified in line with musical needs.

A similar approach is postulated by Tullberg, who develops Gibson's theory of affordance. The affordance perspective does not focus primarily on the instrument as an isolated object, but rather constitutes a relational interpretation in which the central point of analysis is the agent – environment system and relational possibilities. Key to this relationship are spatial networks connecting the organization of the instrument and the music.

> When a spatial network is integrated through sensorimotor schemes it can be said to reside in the musician's fingers. This "automaticity" allows the musician to direct attention to aspects of the performance other than the movements of the hands (Tullberg, 2022, 6)

– singing, falling into a trance, or smiling at the listener... The sensorimotor nature of musical knowledge is revealed here. An *mpamaliha* (*valiha* player) may not know – may not be able to say – how to play a certain set of sounds, which strings to pluck, but he can use the motor knowledge of his hands and fingers to reconstruct that set. The musical affordance that Tullberg raises is based on a "sub-cognitive, pre-linguistic, intrinsically motor form of intentionality" (2022, 4). Moreover, the sensorimotor relationship between musician and instrument "cannot fruitfully be sliced up according to traditional modalities. Such analytical approach would be a brutal abstraction of the experience of playing a musical instrument" (2022, p. 7). Affordances are inherently amodal–they emerge in an experience that engages the whole body. It is also important that they are always situated in a specific ecological niche, a context in which an agent exists, and cannot be discussed without reference to it. Tulberg defines the musical niche as a combination of "aesthetic value systems, institutional framings, historical background, function of the music at hand, its role in society, and its acoustic dimension" (Tullberg, 2022, p. 4). Musical life takes place in different niches and acoustic realities that influence what sound is desired and how it is achieved – e.g., through the use of amplifiers or changes in construction, as in the case of the *valiha* from idiochord to heterochord, dictated by changes in the paradigmatic cultural state and the emergence of new niches.

The idea of an instrument globally connects groups of homeomorphically equivalent artifacts mechanical parts of cyborgs, arm extensions, breathing apparatus... An instrument is not necessarily a matter of concept or a patented invention of a single mind, but a product of human functioning in an environment where matter itself reveals its acoustic potential in interaction. The idea of a musical instrument can be originally embodied, resulting from affordance. Our cognition is dispersed in the body, which in turn is concentrated among other matter. Thus, the world from which this idea originates may be the physical reality that surrounds us – the world accessible to human senses.

Instruments are part of our species' existence, participating in the production of what is human. Chernoivanenko et al. analyze their role in the realization of various forms of humanity. In folk music, which fills the everyday world, instruments are an indispensable component of "the realization of bodily-somatic, emotional, functionally practical forms of the human" (2023, p. 65). A striking example is military music, which shapes and supports the spirit of Homo militaris. Musical instruments, which "extend" man, have also allowed the development of a direction of "denial of what is human" – "instruments act as mediators between this and other worlds. In myths, the sound of a musical instrument is most often associated with creation, world order, and harmony" (2023, p. 66). Here, anthropopoiesis becomes a process of transcending or suspending existing forms. In turn, mass music, with its instruments and technologies, seems to the authors to produce a "mass person" – "state of mass, unity, non-individualization as a stable complex of spiritual and emotional states" (2023, p. 67).

Traditional Malagasy beliefs about instruments can be illustrated by the Tamilahy myth of their origin, as pointed out by Rakotomalala:

> to enable men and women to entertain themselves, the creator god, Zanahary, gave them musical instruments; unaware of the blessing of these gifts, the people neglected them, and to punish this neglect, Zanahary transformed the men and women into dogs. The myth implies that musical instruments had a divine origin, as did the particular power of certaininstruments to call ancestral spirits (1998, p. 783).

The belief in their power was also expressed in the practices of the Sakalava kings, who demonstrated it by hanging them "in front of royal huts, or at the entrance of royal villages" Rakotomalala, 1998, p. 783); in the practices of the Central Highlands, where at the end of the 18th century, conquered principalities "were required to present a *valiha* to the Merina King as a symbol of their subjugation" (Schmidofer, 2005, p. 88); in fetishism or the cult of Vazimba – the legendary indigenous inhabitants of Madagascar.

It is said that the *valiha* best expresses the soul of typical Malagasy music, the Malagasy spirit, or that sentimental music drew its peaceful and delicate inspiration from this instrument – we will see that it is certainly the most effective of all instruments in realizing the Malagasy identity, full of *fihavanana*:

> a spirit of mutual assistance that orders and cements relationships among the living on one hand, and between the living and the dead on the other. Used in ritual and festivecontexts, the *valiha* participates in the notion of *fihavanana* that structures Malagasy society, creates a sense of belonging, and traditionally seals the unity of the group (Razafindrakoto, 2003, p. 141) [translation by author].

Musical instruments contribute to the effects of human musical production, but they also humanize it in the processes of continuous reconfiguration of what is human. However, let us not ask what is in our heads, let us ask what our heads and hands are made of.

In the beginning was bamboo...: how to play *valiha*

Bamboo – in the cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania, a plant with unique symbolism, embodying harmony with nature, perseverance, and flexibility – affords a special kind of technical and musical creativity. Its segmented structure, natural resonant hollow and elastic, layered epidermis offer the constructor a material that requires exposure rather than imposition of form. In the rich Malagasy bamboo instrumentarium, among idiophones and aerophones (see Sachs, 1938; Schmidhofer, 2005), the *valiha* stands out as an idiophone chordophone – an instrument whose strings are not added but extracted from the body of the material. Researchers attribute the origin of this design to Austronesian influences. Similar instruments – the *talempong botuang*, struck tube zither (idiochord), and *sasando* (heterochord) plucked tube zither – can be found in Java, Borneo, and Timor. This origin of the *valiha* contributes to the Austronesian ethnogenesis of the Malagasy (Schmidhofer 2005; Blench 2014; Adams, 2018b). The term *valiha* itself comes from the Sanskrit *vaadya*/*vadhya*, meaning 'musical instrument' (Sachs, 1938) or 'instrument of sacred music' (Rakotomalala, 1998, p. 776).

The creation of an idiochord *valiha* (*tory tenany*) from bamboo – *Dendrocalamus giganteus* or the evergreen, endemic species *Valiha diffusa* (Pfeifer, 2023) – "35 to 180 cm long and 5 to 10 cm in diameter" (Schmidhofer, 2005, p. 86) requires a minimalist, precise set of tools: blades for delicately prying and cutting thin strips from the epidermis of a bamboo segment (*volo*), pieces of calabash, *voatavo* siny melon or wood for mobile bridges (*tuham-valiha*) for lifting and tuning the strings, and some plant material to protect them from tearing. Despite its structural complexity, which requires a deep understanding of the behavior of the material, tension, and resonance, the *valiha* remains close to nature: its form literally grows out of the segmented logic of bamboo – the central internode becomes a resonance chamber, the longitudinal slit in it becomes a resonance opening, and the two transnodes define the boundaries of the instrument, while also serving as anchor points for the strings. It was this segmented anatomy that enabled the later evolution towards the heterochord (*jihyvy*): the nails fastening the metal strings (derived, for example, from bicycle brake cables) are most securely hammered in around the nodes, which are additionally wrapped with wire, string, or a metal or leather strap. The heterochordal *valiha* gave up the affordance of the epidermis to decorative incisions and pyrography – visual and symbolic decorations on the surface of bamboo, which turn out to be a space for enacting the specific heritage and identity of the instrument (see Adams, 2018a; 2018b, pp. 51–67).

The affordance of bamboo transfers to the way the *valiha* is played. To play such prepared bamboo, several positions can be adopted: sitting with the instrument upright, holding the lower end between the legs – this, not counting the use of a strap, provides the greatest mobility for the hands; standing, sitting and walking with the instrument pointing upwards, holding the lower end tightly under the armpit (which limits complete freedom); sitting with the instrument

tilted downwards and resting on the thigh; or – known in the south – sitting with the instrument placed on a resonator, e.g., a tin can, for amplification. All positions are legitimate – they result from practice, tradition, and the individual preferences of the performer.

In each of them, the performer is able to hold the instrument with their hands and play with all their fingers – nails or fingertips. Spatial networks connect the bridges with strings arranged symmetrically in two opposite sections, assigned to the right and left hands respectively, divided (in mature forms) by the central, lowest string, located above the inter-bridge gap. *Valiha* strings afford various gestures and articulations: plucked/pizzicato – often simultaneously on two neighboring strings; scratched/tremolo, glissando, percussive struk or "brushed" damping (e.g., for a staccato effect), and others. Virtuosos of these instruments develop individual ornamentations, fundamental to playing the *valiha*, known as *filatro*, which are part of a living, unwritten tradition, transmitted in the master-apprentice relationship. However, the articulation possibilities acquire musical sense only within the context of the scale and chordature of the instrument. The strings, regardless of their total number, are arranged on both half-cylinders, progressing from low to high notes in thirds, together completing the scale. In this respect, the *valiha* is partly analogous to the African kora (Magrini, 1988; Rakotomalala 1998) or thumb pianos. Plucking neighboring strings produces a third or a chord; glissando results in an arpeggio, and playing a fragment of the scale requires ambidextrous technique:

> The heptatonic diatonic scale [*lalandava*], the basis of the *valiha*'s language, is in fact produced by alternating the sounds of the left section with those of the right section. This evidently implies the full equivalence of the contributions of the individual hands in melodic construction and thus an ambidextrous execution technique" (Magrini, 1988, 57) [translation by author].

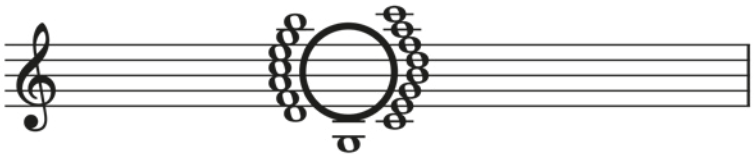

Figure 1
Valiha lalandava chordature scheme.

Like the Malagasy language, the *valiha* is known throughout the island. In different parts of the island, among different *foko* (ethnic groups), it was known as *manibola*, *betoroky*, *vadiha*, *vala*, *bao*, *marovany*... A total of 34 local names for different varieties of *valiha* have been catalogued (Razafindrakoto, 2003). However, outside the bamboo ecosystem, and also due to forest fires, there were instruments made from other materials. The construction of two semi- cylindrical pieces of *hazo malagny* wood (*Hernandia voyroni*), bound with palm bark or metal strips, replicates the logic of an empty resonance tube. In the north, among the Tsimihety, the *valiha bezy* or *bao* was made from the stems of raffia palm leaves – a lighter, more fibrous material, but equally susceptible to the

extraction of strings from its outer layer. Among the Bara, the *masikoha* or *manibola*, which used a wooden tube, was known. Other heterochord types also use sheet metal or rectangular boxes (*marovany*, *vata*), transforming the *valiha* into a case zither, in which the function of the resonator is taken over by a flat box (Rakotomalala, 1998; Schmidchofer, 2005). Magrini (1988) analyzes the *valiha* from Sainte-Marie, which, using sheet metal, regains its cylindrical shape, but significantly changes the dimensions of the instrument, increasing its diameter and the proportions of the resonance chamber. Despite the change in the material carrier, these instruments retain the essence of the *valiha* – the logic of spatial networks and a specific model of chordature, which essentially determine the playing technique and musical structure, and maybe even more.

Musical instruments materialize specific rules of motor and cognitive organization. In the European tradition, many instruments establish asymmetry in the functions of the hands through the separation of tasks (e.g., right hand – incitement/sound length, left hand – pitch change) or their hierarchization within registers. There are, of course, exceptions among chordophones, such as the cimbalom or hammered dulcimer. Magrini notes that the *valiha* "implies full equality of contribution of both hands in the melodic construction" (1988, p. 57) [translation by author]. This ambidexterity as a structural principle raises intriguing questions in the context of neuroplasticity and brain lateralization: can instruments shape different neuroplastic patterns or otherwise influence lateralization processes? In its physical structure, the *valiha* seems to embody the principle of equality, interdependence, and integration. However, it remains outside the scope of current neuroscientific research.

The broad, ethnically and functionally diverse repertoire of the *valiha* remains structurally influenced by the relational possibilities discussed above. However, its study requires prior recognition of the instrument's evolution. The *valiha* is a centuries-old instrument that has persisted in cultural practice not through the stabilization of some "primitive" form, but through its continuous updating. Key modernizations over the centuries have taken place in relation to the number and quality of strings. The number of strings determines the scale and limits the musical material. It is pointed out that the first idiochords (*tory tenany*) had five or six strings, which gradually increased to ten (*valiha tory folo*) and more, resulting in the standard diatonic *valiha* with different scale registers.

> The instrument carries forward an ancient repertoire while simultaneously inspiring new creations. It is quite common for the same instrumental piece to be performed on different types of *valiha*. A single musical theme may be 'treated' in various ways depending on which *valiha* is employed: varying durations of sound sustainment on the rhythmic level, contrasting or complementary registers on the melodic level, and the creation of sonic layers through dynamic intensity variations, among other approaches. (Razafindrakoto, 1999, p. 138) [translation by author].

The hexatonic scale (f – g – a – b – c – d), combining two sections progressing in thirds (f – a – c on the right and g – b – d on the left), is sufficient to perform certain pieces, such as the popular song Betsiboka. However, most of the repertoire in different parts of the island is based on heptatonic scales: *lalandava* ('straight ahead') and others created by alteration – the maty ('dead') system: *maty roa* ('two

dead'), *maty telo* ('three dead'), *maty dimy* ('five dead'), *maty sivy* ('nine dead'). However, within this system and the general logic of chord progression, due to the lack of a range, the tuning of individual instruments differed in pitch and temperament. Razafindrakoto, based on the observation that ensemble musicians did not seek perfect unison when tuning their instruments, even considers "the existence of an ethos among *valiha* players in Imerina for whom tuning translates into a form of individual expression" (1999, 134) [translation by author]. There were also individual differences in the organization of spatial networks between performers. One of the historical masters, Rakotozafy, played the *valiha* with the strings arranged in reverse pitch order, as well as a modification of the string order that went beyond the strict thirds arrangement. I encountered a similar modification on Sainte- Marie (notation follows the Helmholtz system): A♭ – c – e♭– b♭– g – d♭' – f' – a' – c" – e♭" on the right, E♭ – B♭– d♭– a♭– f – c' – e♭'– g' – b♭'– d♭" on the left. Each of these layouts, combined with the mobility of the human hand and possible fingerings, contributes to the effects that fuel Malagasy music on a structural, textural, functional, and stylistic-genre level.

A fundamental feature of the playing technique and musical language is the reference to the intervallic (often stepwise) movement of the melody through the alternating use of the hands (in appropriate registers, complementing each other in opposite sections), usually in parallel thirds (i.e., always with two fingers of one hand), accompanying the melody and reinforcing tonal functions – in short, the melody emerges in a dialogue between the hands. Playing with both hands simultaneously and separating tasks within the fingers of one hand allows for the extraction of complex and independent polyphonic melodic-rhythmic patterns – Magrini (1988), based on an analysis of the repertoire, mentions hoquetus, bass ostinato, and single and double rhythmic pedals.

In every part of Madagascar in the dialect of function with the technique and affordance of the available *valiha* type, regional musical styles have developed that are so idiomatic to Malagasy ears that they allow them to identify their origin. Without going into the most specific regional differences, two traditional tendencies can be identified. The first, soft music, is based on accompanying virtuosic and sentimental melodies in thirds and enriching the musical form with ornamental preludes, interludes, and postludes – characteristic of the Merina tradition, "the ethnic group that has been most impacted by Indonesian culture" (Schmidhofer, 2005, p. 88) and some neighboring groups of the Central Highlands. Rhythmic music, on the other hand, uses repetitions of melodic patterns and accidental beats in the organization of often polyrhythmic structures – widely used in the south and coastal regions, among the Sakalava and Betsimisaraka.

Playing the *valiha* is a socio-cultural practice – it is embedded in specific ecological and musical niches that define its social, institutional, and functional framework. For example, during the Merina rule, it became an instrument of the andriana (aristocracy); it was associated with power and authority to such an extent that until the mid-19th century, slaves were forbidden to play it (Schmidchofer, 2005, p. 88). *Valiha* music has historically been associated with various such environments among different *foko* – the *tromba* ritual (Sakalava, Betsi-

misaraka, Bara, Tsimihety), *mpilalao/mpihira gasy* bards (Merina, Sakalawa, Masikoro, Mahafaly), various life, funeral and court ceremonies, and, of course, entertainment. The *instrumentality* of the *valiha* in these contexts was not a passive property of the object, but it's constitutive doing.

The rhythmic music of the *tromba* ritual was intended to put the medium into a trance, to summon and identify the spirit:

> each spirit has a favorite melody, by which the one who invokes spirits identifies them. An experienced musician must demonstrate his skill in his choice of melodies, for the spirits sometimes refuse to appear. The sounds are considered to have magic power, just as water and incense in these ceremonies do (Rakotomalala, 1998, p. 788).

In the musical and oratorical traditions of the Central Highlands groups, the *valiha* accompanied singing, affectivizing and saturating the message of "moral stories, praise songs, gossip songs, sad songs, and political or out-group diatribes" (McLeod, 1964, pp. 279–280).

The repertoire presented by Vola Soa, a vocal-instrumental duo recorded on Sainte-Marie, consisted mainly of dance pieces: *tutudiha* and *basesa*. The lyrics dealt with interpersonal relationships and happiness, which in itself is identified here with movement. The music played rhythmically on the *valiha* was supported by a percussionist playing the *dingy* (drum) and *kaiamba* (rattle) – percussion instruments provide the spatial and rhythmic basis here. Originally, the second musician struck the instrument itself – the *valiha vata* affords such a movement. However, the context of the performance was the Festival des baleines, where the status of the instrument as traditional and national was of significant importance.

Musical niches are not stable, and the vitality of a given repertoire is determined by the fact that it is 'moved' to another – representative, festival or, to mention, educational. In many traditional contexts – including tromba – the *valiha* has been replaced by the diatonic accordion (gorodao) or other instruments and technologies. Interestingly, in the culture-emerging taxonomy, these instruments (*zavamaneo*) are classified together as *tendrena*, 'to play' (Rakotomala, 1989, pp. 783). On the other hand, it is precisely the changing realities of the environment that enable the development of music – for example, European collectors encouraged Me-

Figure 2
Tamba Robert and Jean Louis.
Note. Photo by Joanna Kwapień.

rina musicians to adopt a faster, virtuoso style of playing (Adams, 2018b: 6) – and musical instruments.

The key impulse in the organological evolution of the *valiha* was contact with European governments and the import of various goods from abroad. The famous *beso varahina* (*beso*, 'bass'/'low note'; *varahina*, 'copper') were first tried out in 1817, during the reign of King Radama I. These were three metal bass strings attached to the *valiha* with wooden *an-kodiny* pegs. "These instruments reflect a new musical understanding, induced by chants of Christian churches that allowed for a solid bass foundation (Schmidhofer, 2005, p. 86).

The increase in the overall number of strings in the development of the instrument was associated with the adaptation of metal strings (*jihyvy*). Interest in this material stemmed from its durability and hygrometric stability, but also from its acoustic properties. As Razafindrakoto observes, "on the musical level, the metal string offers better perception of pitch relationships (low/high), durations (long/short), and intensities (loud/soft), making it possible to highlight playing effects that remain barely perceptible on the plant string" (1999, p. 138). The researcher's studies show a twentyfold higher radiation quality factor (Q) for metal strings. New possibilities and aesthetic values led to the emergence of the heterochord at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which eventually replaced the idiochord.

This transformation brought with it an acoustemological change, linked to a deep awareness of sound among the Merina – "timbre is experienced 'from within,' in its primary nature, that is to say as the source of music" (Razafindrakoto, 1999, p. 139), it takes on its meaning by referring to collective memory. The researcher identifies a tension between the structural and expressive power of sound, an onto-epistemological dialectic: the sound of the idiochord refers to the world of ancestors, rituals, and community ceremonies; the sound of the heterochord is associated with sensitivity to modernity; and the variants élastique (with rubber bracelet) and *sympathiques* (with strings connected in choirs) simulate, respectively, a return to the sources and the whims of the modern world.

Currently, the *valiha* functions primarily in a national niche, where it has its historical and semantic reputation. The status of this instrument has been consolidated through contact with *other* – starting from the World Exhibition in Paris (1900) to the international scene and the world music arena – as well as cultural policy and the printing of banknotes with the *valiha* icon. It should be noted that the instrument does not only express a pre-existing culture, but co-creates the current one. With the development of the Christian mission, colonial administration, and post-colonial music industry, the functional environments of the instrument became Christian ceremonies (although at the end of the 19th century, the *valiha* was to be banned by European clergy due to its association with pagan practices), state institutions, media, educational institutions, contemporary and popular music scenes and studios – associated with the amplification and electrification of the instrument – as well as the home retreats of musicians...

One of them is Mr. Ratovonirina Ranaivovololona, also presenting himself as Ratovo – a renowned instrumentalist, *valiha* virtuoso, author of introductory

works, talented visual artist, constructor of various instruments, and finally, producer of the chromatic *valiha*. He began building instruments in the 1980s, when he also began researching island styles of playing the *valiha* and collecting repertoire. In ensemble practice, the instruments were naturally tuned, and, as with hook harps, modulation and chromaticism could only be achieved through mechanical interference with the string (the *maty* system). In his hands, the *valiha* gained another evolutionary incarnation, although, as he himself states, he was not the first or the only one to decide to tackle its limitations – various musicians had been conducting research in this area since the 1960s (Benoît Rakotomanga, Rémy Randafison, Maurice Halison, Fredy Ranarison, Réne Ramilinjatovo, and André Rakotorahalahy).

Figure 3
Mr. Ratovonirina Ranaivovololona with a lalandava valiha *during a visit to his workshop, Antananarivo, Madagascar, 1 August 2024.*
Note. Photo by Joanna Kwapień.

In 1993, the RATOVO model received a "Validation" certificate from Jobonin Razafindrakoto. Its great advantage is that it retains the standard chordatura and *lalandava* scale, introducing the possibility of chromatic playing thanks to additional strings tuned to complement the pentatonic diatonic scale (analogous to the black keys on a keyboard). The complementary strings are placed between the others, in order of pitch, in a section consistent with the principle of altering the basic heptatonic sound downwards (c precedes d, d precedes e, f precedes g, and so on). The separation of the heptatonic strings from the chromatic scale is achieved by lowering the filling strings at a certain pitch – approximately one-third of their length – using a strip to the surface of the bamboo, where they are no longer accessible to the fingers. The total number of strings is 27: 16 diatonic and 11 complementary pentatonic. This successful combination of tradition and innovation allows for the smooth performance of traditional repertoire and the adoption of Western repertoire, inspiring new directions such as jazz gasy. In terms of affordance, chromatic density complicates spatial networks and playing technique if this actually uses chromaticism. Playing any of these notes requires precise selection and incitement of the string. Chords derived from them are no longer technically the sum of neighboring strings in a single sequence; they require deeper consideration of the mode and cooperation of both hands. Nevertheless, all of the numerous arrangements remain within reach.

Rethinking things: *valiha* ontological shift

The title of this article may suggest two things: transcending the passive musical instrumentality of the *valiha* and transcending strictly musical instrumentality in general. The *valiha* is a relational phenomenon, exhibiting ontic-epistemic tension. Previous analyses have treated this subject of study as a musical instrument. However, this ontology, remaining in line with earlier findings, remains performative and merely essentializes an artifact that in practice is entangled in networks of social relations, among which specific apparatuses determine what it *is*. In this way, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, *valihas* became collector's items for European colonizers – a collection of several *valihas* won the Grand Prix at the Exposition de Hanoi in 1902 (Adams, 2018, p. 56) – and exhibition exhibits, affording "don't touch" from behind a glass case... An object behind glass only imagines its "first" ontology in the viewer, depriving it of its affordances. However, these remain amodal – the form continues to perform, affording visual contemplation.

In the Sakalava and other regions influenced by Arab culture, the *valiha* was decorated with cosmic symbols – also on Sainte-Marie – emphasizing the transcendental functions of the instrument. In the Central Highlands, bamboo heterochords adopted visuals that became a vehicle for identity – the enactment of identity: in the 19th century, the color red was the symbol of the Merina royal family; in the 20th century, pyrography developed, transferring Merina symbols (the traditional house with *tandro-drano* roof horns, the palace of Queen Ranavalona I, and the figure of the legendary king Andrianampoimerina), symbols of African and Arab provenance (*zebu* cows (*Bos indicus*), *aloalo* grave posts, and cosmic symbols associated with *sikidy* divination practices) and natural symbols of the endemic island (lemurs, ravenala (*Ravenala madagascariensis*)) (Adams, 2018a; 2018b, p. 51–67).

It should be noted that museums on either side of the globe are not an external commentary on the world, but rather an element of it – an apparatus that produces value and knowledge within a specific paradigm. In this way, *valiha* served traditional organology rooted in evolutionary thinking, striving to reconstruct linear and progressive trajectories of development; interdisciplinary discourse on ethnogenesis; postcolonial nation-building processes, drawing on globally defined uniqueness and internal historical-semantic reputation; or the tourism economy, supporting the offer of the endemic paradise island. *Valiha* was used in official state representations – by musical ambassadors such as Ratovo, Rajery, Justin Vali – and state- sponsored cultural events (such as the Festival des baleines). As a result, there has been a shift from a regional instrument used in local functional environments to a national instrument, from a musical instrument to a symbol, and further to its commodification.

In 2017, the Central Bank of Madagascar began the process of replacing banknotes, introducing new designs featuring the island's riches, including the *valiha* icon on the 10,000 ariary banknote. This act is a clear manifestation of a definite 'regime of value' (see Appadurai, 1986, p. 4). Even in Malagasy homes,

valiha can be found as decorations – "because it really portrays our identity, it is what makes us Malagasy first, and it brings a sense of pride", says one of the instrumentalists. On the streets of Antananarivo, tourists can also buy *valiha* in the form of small souvenirs. These copies fetishize *valiha*, reducing it to a commodity, primarily affordable for carry-on luggage.

Currently, in Madagascar itself, the *valiha* is not as popular as the banknote or the attention of ethnomusicologists might suggest. Of course, no Malagasy is born with any knowledge of what the *valiha* is, and today many young people may not even be familiar with the instrument "in person". What is more important is that as adults they will relate to their own identity through it, affecting it through its historical-semantic reputation (the reception of sound is also acoustemological, founded in culture, ancestor worship…).

The scale of the phenomenon, whatever it may be, should not negate its connection with local microeconomies – bamboo suppliers, handicraft manufacturers and traders, functional instrument constructors, or seamstresses sewing covers for them – which form the material infrastructure for the *valiha*'s presence on stage, in the classroom, in the comfort of one's home… whether in one's hands or on a shelf. The trajectories of artifacts – their 'biographies' (see Kopytoff, 1986, p. 64–92), performative statuses – are socially defined.

This reflection offers an extension of the analytical lens–not to the cultural context of a *musical* instrument, the musical niche, i.e., where it actually co-creates music, but to the "actantial" social instrumentality resulting not from the culturally defined function of a thing, but from the practical dimension of its action in a network (see Latour, 2005). As Bates emphasizes, the appeal of theories such as ANT (actor-network theory) "is the mandate to preserve what is termed the messiness of technology. Rather than distilling things down into a sanitized account, the mess is front and center" (2019, p. 47). Ethnography must rely on a phenomenological description of what appears as *valiha*: from instruments in the musicians' interface, through museum exhibits or merchandise, to a national icon. The performance of *valiha* does not end with music. These approaches allow us to look at *valiha* as something much more than a sound object – an actant in a network of relationships, a thing saturated with memory, identity, and affect. Other ontologies thus remain faithful to empiricism insofar as they oppose the reduction of reality to a context defined by the disciplinary purification of the object.

Summary

The *valiha* is not a secondary tool of the musical and social system. It contributes to both the musical repertoire and the repertoire of human attitudes; it is more than an instrument–more than just a musical one. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that organizes human experience and co-creates Malagasy reality on many levels: physiological, cognitive, social, symbolic, economic, political, and even transcendental. It is an instrument of cultural transmission *par*

excellence – not as a passive transmitter, but as an active co-creator of what is transmitted. As an instrument of identity processes, it does not so much express as performatively enact Malagasy identity in its syncretic dynamics.

Recommended discography

Rakotozafy, R. (1988). *Valiha Malaza* [Album]. Studio Mars.
Randafison, S., Ranaivovololona, R., & Randrianantoanina, D. (2000). *L'art de la valiha* [Album]. Arion.
Various Artists. (1983). *Valiha Madagascar* [Album]. Ocora.

References

Adams, R. E. (2018a). The making of a national instrument. *Music in Art*, *43*(1), 141–158.

Adams, R. E. (2018b). *Madagascar's musical migrations: Instruments as framework to reimagine early Indian Ocean contact* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town].

Appadurai, A. (1986). Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (pp. 3–63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baily, J. (2025). John Blacking and the "human/musical instrument interface": Two plucked lutes from Afghanistan. *European Journal of Musicology*, *23*(1), 137–152.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs*, *28*(3), 801–831.

Blacking, J. (1955). Eight flute tunes from Butembo, East Belgian Congo. *African Music*, *1*(2), 24–52.

Blacking, J. (1959). Patterns of Nsenga kalimba music. *African Music*, *2*(4), 26–43.

Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Blench, R. M. (2014). Using diverse sources of evidence for reconstructing the past history of musical exchanges in the Indian Ocean. *African Archaeological Review*, *31*(4), 675–703.

Born, G. (2005). On musical mediation: Ontology, technology and creativity. *Twentieth- Century Music*, *2*(1), 7–36.

Chernoivanenko, A., Liu, Y., Zhang, X., Murza, S., & Ivanova, L. (2023). A musical instrument as an anthropological phenomenon. *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, *13*(1), 64–68.

Haraway, D. J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In D. J. Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149–181). New York: Routledge.

Heyde, H. (1975). *Grundlagen des natürlichen Systems der Musikinstrumente*. VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik.

Ingold, T. (2007). Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues*, *14*(1), 1–16.

Johnson, H. M. (1995). An ethnomusicology of musical instruments: Form, function, and meaning. *JASO*, *26*(3), 257–269.

Kartomi, M. J. (2001). The classification of musical instruments: Changing trends in research from the late nineteenth century, with special reference to the 1990s. *Ethnomusicology*, *45*(2), 283–314.

Kopytoff, I. (1986). The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (pp. 64–92). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kvifte, T. (2008). What is a musical instrument? *Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning*, *90*, 45– 56.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Magrini, T. (1988). La *valiha* dell'Ile Sainte-Marie (Madagascar). *Culture Musicali*, *10–11*, 233–258.

McLeod, N. (1964). The status of musical specialists in Madagascar. *Ethnomusicology*, *8*(3), 278–289.

McLeod, N. (1977). Musical instruments and history in Madagascar. In J. Kunst (Ed.), *Essays for a humanist: An offering to Klaus Wachsmann* (pp. 189–215). Town House Press.

McLeod, N. (1980). Malagasy Republic. In S. Sadie (Ed.), *The New Grove dictionary of music and musicians* (Vol. 11, pp. 547–549). Macmillan.

Nettl, B. (1964). *Theory and method in ethnomusicology*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Nęcka, E., Orzechowski, J., Szymura, B., & Wichary, S. (2006). *Psychologia poznawcza*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Pfeifer, N. (2023). *Botanical resonance: Learn more about Madagascar instruments*. Discover and Share. https://discoverandshare.org/2023/01/13/botanical-resonance-learn-more-about-madagascar-instruments/

Rakotomalala, M. (1998). Performance in Madagascar. In R. M. Stone (Ed.), *The Garland encyclopedia of world music* (Vol. 1, pp. 781–792). New York, London: Garland Publishing.

Randafison, S. (1991). *Madagasikara ethnomusicology* [Unpublished lecture notes]. University of Washington, School of Music.

Randafison, S. (n.d.). *The valiha* [Unpublished manuscript].

Razafindrakoto, J. (1999). Le timbre dans le répertoire de la *valiha*, cithare tubulaire de Madagascar. *Cahiers d'Ethnomusicologie*, *12*, 173–189.

Razafindrakoto, J. M. (2003). La *valiha* face à la tradition et à la modernité: Un paradoxe permanent. *Kabaro*, *2*(2–3), 129–145.

Sachs, C. (1938). *Les instruments de musique de Madagascar*. Institut d'Ethnologie, Université de Paris.

Schmidhofer, A. (2005). Some remarks on the Austronesian background of Malagasy music. In *The international forum of ethnomusicology in Taiwan: Interpretation and evolvement of musical sound* (pp. 75–93). National Taiwan Normal University.

Tullberg, M. (2022). Affordances of musical instruments: Conceptual consideration. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, Article 935448.