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African Instrumentation in Musicals: From Traditional Drums to Modern Electronics – An Analysis of the Use of African Instruments in Musicals and Their Influence on Musical Arrangement

ABSTRACT: This article examines the use of African instruments in contemporary musicals, from traditional drums and percussion to modern electronic forms inspired by African rhythms. These instruments are not merely elements of ethnic decoration but also serve a significant narrative, emotional, and identity-building function. The article examines musicals like *The Lion King*, *Fela!*, and *Once on This Island*, where African sounds become integral to the storytelling and mood-building. The analysis aims to demonstrate how African instruments enrich the musical form with unique cultural and rhythmic layers that would be difficult to achieve using only Western instrumentation. The text also demonstrates how African influences permeate modern arrangements, combining ethnic traditions with innovation.

KEYWORDS: contemporary musical, ethnomusicology, African instruments, African sounds

Introduction

The contemporary musical, as a form of performing art bordering on theater and opera, conveys emotions, values, and ideas. The storytelling engages its audience through the use of music, which emphasizes emotions, portrays changes (both historical and in the characters' behavior), and builds a world without any barriers other than the constraints of the theater's stage architecture. Shaping a contemporary musical as an eclectic, multi-material art form is impossible without a sound layer specifically tailored to the performance, often based on musical genres and instruments tailored to the historical period, region, or dynamically evolving plot. Despite its rich tradition and profound cultural

significance, African instrumentation is rarely used in contemporary musicals. The African instrumentation tradition, rich in rhythm, is a significant source of value, both in terms of ethnic unity and cultural heritage. The marginal use of music in the structure of a Broadway stage show prompts reflection on the apparent asymmetry in the representation of musical traditions and the failure to fully utilize the potential for building intercultural relations.

From a longer historical perspective, it should be noted that the process of incorporating ethnic instruments into musicals is not a purely contemporary phenomenon, occurring in the last three decades, but a long-term process dating back to the golden age of musicals, when composers began to recognize the cultural potential of these sounds. A breakthrough began as early as 1959 with Todd Matshikiza's African-American musical *King Kong*, which combined jazz music with local rhythms and dances, employing exclusively Black performers as actors. This challenge broke stereotypes and led to the creation of the African Jazz Opera (Matshikiza, 2000, pp. 95–96) genre. The aforementioned example, though pioneering, still operated on the fringes of representing African musical traditions – ethnic instruments could still be used solely as decorative elements, conveying the 'exotic' and were less often focused on driving the narrative of the performance. As Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh note in their publication 'Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music,' the essence of music performance lies in the medium used, presented through other cultures, rhetorical figures, and borrowings (Born, Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Contemporary musicals, as a performing art, are thus revolutionizing cultural borrowing by shifting the role of instruments, which become vehicles of identity, memory, and resistance. The works of the golden age of musicals, having been the seeds of change, have now led to artistic and cultural integration. Historical precedents suggest that this transformation did not occur overnight, but rather was an evolution initiated by artists who dared to make African music more than just an exotic background.

The starting point for this article was the author's fascination with contemporary musicals and his desire to better understand the mechanisms by which they influence audiences, as well as the issue of the absence of ethnic elements in the musical and stage structure of theatrical productions. In this article, the author analyzes three musicals featuring African instruments, ranging from the award-winning musical adaptation of the animated film *The Lion King* produced by Walt Disney Animation Studio to the biographical musical *Fela!*, demonstrating how African sounds have been adapted to the needs of the musical stage and examining their role in the interpretation of cultural identity.

The King of Africa and Broadway

Among musicals that utilize African instruments in their sound, *The Lion King* deserves particular attention, having won six Tony Awards, widely considered the theatrical equivalent of the Academy Awards. The Walt Disney Animation Studios animated film adaptation is also considered the highest-gross-

ing production in Broadway history, grossing \$2 billion (Seymour, 2017). Directed by Julie Taymor, the production pioneered the 'double event' (Gabrie, 2015) technique in musical theater, meaning that audiences saw both the actors' faces and the animal masks and puppets at every moment of the performance. According to scholar Sara Whitfield, *The Lion King* reflects contemporary racial discourse precisely through its expression of identity (Whitfield, 2019, pp. 39–40). Whitfield defines a musical as 'made for Black people' by stating that if a performance requires a Black body to convey its central message, it is entangled in a racial identity debate. This technique was intended to allow audiences to experience the humanity of the story. Inspired by African culture, Taymor and the costume designers decided that the masks worn by the actors would have only one emotion, in order to make them as clear as possible to the audience, both those sitting in the front rows and those further away from the stage (Taymor, Horn, 1997, p. 45).

The scenography, designed by Michael Curry (Curry, 2025), utilizes moving elements such as a rotating stage, protruding rocks, and a rising sun, not only illustrating the action of the performance but also providing a partial exposure for the musicians outside the orchestra pit. The instrumentalists, positioned on the sides of the stage, symbolically evoke the communal model of musical performance characteristic of traditional African cultures. Their visibility aligns with Julie Taymor's concept of exposing theatrical illusion and building a multi-layered stage experience.

The orchestra assembled for *The Lion King* consists of twenty-three members and one hundred twenty-three instruments, eighty-seven of which are played by four percussionists. The extensive instrumentation includes:

African instruments:

- Djembe – a traditional goblet drum from West Africa,
- Talking drum – a membranophone imitating the tonality of human speech,
- Balafon – a xylophone originating from Guinean and Malian traditions,



Figure 1

Actors from the original cast with their masks.

Note. From "How Did Julie Taymor Come Up With the Mask Designs for Each Lion King Character?" by R. Fierberg, 2017, Playbill (<https://playbill.com/article/how-did-julie-taymor-come-up-with-the-mask-designs-for-each-lion-king-character>). Retrieved April 28, 2025.

- Shekere – a percussion instrument made from a gourd tied with beads,
- Udu – a clay percussion instrument from Nigeria.

Woodwind instruments:

- Transverse flute,
- Piccolo flute,
- Ethnic flutes from Ireland, Ecuador, and China.

String instruments:

- Violins,
- Violas,
- Cellos.

Keyboard and string instruments:

- Pianos,
- Synthesizers,
- Electric guitars,
- Bass guitars,
- Hawaiian guitars (ukulele).

The use of African instrumentation in *The Lion King* serves not only an aesthetic function, showcasing the musicians on stage, but also serves as a foundation for the idiom of cultural and sonic identity. Instruments such as the shekere, djembe, and balafon shape the performance's rhythmic pulsation, reflecting the naturalness of African social life. The musical's opening scene, featuring the piece 'Circle of Life,' resonates with drums symbolizing a communal call to gather, paralleling tribal initiation ceremonies. In this same segment, the audience can hear a declaration of cultural identity, beginning with Zulu chants, continuing with the construction of a musical structure using drums and rattles, and finally seamlessly transitioning to a full orchestration, where Western instruments merge with indigenous African ones. This moment establishes a new framework for musical art, presenting music as a space for intercultural dialogue (Taymor, Horn, 1997, pp. 134–137).

Another crucial passage where indigenous music influences the play's reception is the song 'He Lives in You,' which marks the culmination of the protagonist Simba's spiritual awakening. The piece's narrative portrays the protagonist's shift toward his true identity, acceptance of the past, and coming to terms with responsibility for his actions. Musically, djembe and dundun drums are used to convey a deeply rooted, rhythmic, and bass-resonant musical tradition. These are complemented by rattles to emphasize the protagonist's emotional turmoil, which gradually transforms into a sense of community and spiritual peace. As with 'Circle of Life,' chanting in Zulu and English, a collective vocal tradition of African peoples, also appears. Vocally, this piece provides a counterpoint to Simba's previous isolation; it is both a narrative turning point and a moment of

intensification of the African presence on stage. Sound as a unity in this piece becomes a tool of transformation and purification. It is a symbolic carrier of the voice of culture, where presence becomes not only a representation, but a real participation in the creation of the plot (Lebo, Rifkin, 1995).

The artistic enrichment of the musical layer with African instrumentation in *The Lion King* reflects a conscious act of rooting the story in tribal culture. This gives the performance an emotional depth that allows audiences to experience a multifaceted connection with the culture of the continent that serves as the source of the entire story. In conclusion, it's worth quoting Geoffrey Block from *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from 'Show Boat' to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber*: 'Julie Taymor's *The Lion King* is an example of a stage musical that goes beyond simple adaptation by incorporating cultural and visual authenticity into the play' (Block, 2009, p. 312).

Let the Afrobeat resonate

Jukebox musicals, based solely on existing, popular songs, constitute a unique form of theatrical storytelling, where the narrative is constructed through the rearrangement of well-known compositions. This form, despite its limitations related to the creative processing of source material, can imbue the musical with a new dramatic context, often based on the life of a famous person. Contemporary jukebox musicals increasingly push the boundaries of entertainment, aspiring to be social narratives with a political identity at their core – as exemplified by the musical *Fela!* based on the work of Nigerian musician and social activist Fela Kuti. As the creator of Afrobeat, a musical genre combining African rhythms with funk and jazz (Veal, 2004, pp. 29–38), Fela Kuti made history not only with his music but also with his Nigerian activism, which involved fighting corruption, poverty, and government mistreatment of citizens. *Fela!*, a 2008 musical written by Bill Jones and Jim Lewis, is a biographical story using only Kuti's music. The play's 1977 events, like a musicology lesson, explain how Kuti created Afrobeat, from the peak of his popularity, through his political actions, to the symbolic final scene, based on real events, in which Fela defies the Nigerian regime by placing his coffin in front of the military barracks where General Olusegun Obasanjo killed his mother (Taiwo, 2017).

Fela! uses Afrobeat not only as an effective narrative device for the protagonist's life, but also as a method of identity affirmation and cultural reconstruction. As in *The Lion King*, African instruments are consciously displayed center stage, constituting an integral part of the performance. The presence of instruments such as drums, guitars, and wind instruments, which are inextricably linked to Fela's work and the twenty-member Antibalas band, specializing in Afrobeat music, intensifies the impression of direct contact with the ritual dimension of African sound produced before the audience's eyes. Music in this play also serves as a tool of resistance and emancipation, as reflected in Fela Kuti's lyrics.



Figure 2

A percussion instrument visible on stage along with members of the Antibalas group.
 Note. From “Fela!” by B. Brantley, 2010, *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/theater/31fela.html>). Retrieved April 30, 2025.

In the first act of the musical *Fela!*, the song ‘Expensive Shit’ plays a significant role, recounting Fela’s unjust accusation of drug possession. ‘Expensive Shit’ weaves into the story a commentary on the absurdity of Nigerian government. Fela Kuti lyrically comments on government corruption and the futility of actions aimed solely at controlling citizens. This energetic composition uses percussion to create a rhythmic foundation that emphasizes the tenacity and power of the message. The intensity of the rhythms reflects the brutality and absurdity of the system that compels the protagonist to fight for freedom. Wind instruments such as saxophone, synthesizers, and trumpets also appear, lending complexity to the melody. These instruments act as a complement to the African instrumentation, filling the musical space and adding depth. It’s important to emphasize that African instrumentation in ‘Expensive Shit’ plays not only a rhythmic role but also becomes a part of the story. The combination of traditional percussion and wind instruments creates an expression of rebellion and a manifesto, in which the music tells not only a biographical story but also engages listeners in the fight for justice and to stand with Fela.

The second act begins with one of Fela Kuti’s most recognizable songs, ‘Water No Get Enemy,’ which expresses the artist’s ideology through the metaphor ‘water has no enemies,’ signifying that despite its gentleness, it was able to overcome all obstacles. The song is an anthem directed at the authorities that suppress freedom, hence the use of the Yoruba language, which is widely spoken in Nigeria. Musically, ‘Water No Get Enemy’ is characterized by the sound of bass drums and djembe, creating a pulsating, continuous trance reminiscent of the movement of water. The drums not only provide the rhythm of the song but also exude a force

reflecting Kuti's resistance movement and speak of the unity and strength of the nation in the fight for justice. Toward the end of the composition, elements of jazz and funk slowly emerge, combining to pay homage to Afrobeat, a genre strongly associated with improvisation.

Globalization has influenced the way African music is presented and perceived worldwide. In the context of *Fela!*, this refers to the fusion of traditional Afrobeat rhythms with modern music production techniques, which may be perceived by audiences as an attempt to assimilate ethnic music into the global music market. Steven Salm sees this phenomenon as an interplay of cultural mixes, intertwined in a complex process of adaptation (Salm, 2010, pp. 1328–1339). In his work, the researcher draws a clear distinction between popular and traditional music but argues that globalization processes are slowly blurring the boundaries, connecting the past with the present through technological advancements, which ultimately leads to the exposure of artists. Globalization, perceived as a process of cultural homogenization, in the case of *Fela!* reveals the complex dynamics of exchange. The performance not only introduces elements of African culture but also reinterprets them in a way that appeals to international audiences without losing their distinctive character. Thanks to this, the musical becomes a cultural bridge that does not reduce art to an export product, but enables its adaptation to a creative encounter between tradition and innovation.

Afrobeat, a genre deeply rooted in African culture and created by Fela Kuti, is a conscious form of cultural, identity, and political expression that operates like a living organism, whose pulse beats in the drums, and whose heart is the voice of the artist refusing to be silenced. In the play, the protagonist has the power



Figure 3

Sahr Ngaujah portrays Fela during the song “Expensive Shit.” The photo shows a saxophone complementing the song’s arrangement.

Note. From “Fela!” by B. Brantley, 2009, *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/theater/22fela.html>). Retrieved May 1, 2025.

to express his anger, not only through facial expressions, spoken sentences, and body language, but also through traditional Nigerian rhythms, which become an extension of his inner rebellion. Each rhythm and instrumental phrase carries an act of suffering and hope, making the music a narrator impossible to silence.

A Song of Division and Concord

Once on This Island, a play created by the duo of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty (Marzullo, 2016), combines a narrative inspired by Caribbean mythology with instrumentals drawn from African musical traditions. Based on the novel *My Love, My Love, or, The Peasant Girl* by Rosa Guy, the musical is a reinterpretation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*. The one-act play, which has been running on Broadway since 1990, tells the story of a young



Figure 4

A tree that symbolizes reconciliation between feuding communities.

Note. From "A Review of *Once on This Island* at the Paper Mill Playhouse" by A. Robertson, 2012, *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/10/nyregion/a-review-of-once-on-this-island-at-the-paper-mill-playhouse.html>). Retrieved May 2, 2025.

girl named Ti Moune living on a Caribbean island divided by race and class. The dark-skinned population in the play's world lives in poverty, while the light-skinned descendants of colonizers live in a separate, vibrant neighborhood. Ti Moune, a member of the former group, falls in love with Daniel Beauxhomme, a wealthy man from a privileged family, whom she saves from a car accident. Despite the protagonist's strong feelings, Daniel is unable to resist the divided society and, in the final scenes, marries a woman from his wealthy circle. Ti Moune dies of a broken heart, and a tree grows at her burial site, uniting the two communities and becoming a bridge to reconciliation.

In *Once on This Island*, and particularly in the 2017 Broadway revival, instrumentation plays a key role in the immersive world of the play. The creators, under the direction of Michael Arden (Filichia, 2025), largely abandoned traditional instruments in favor of everyday objects and recycled materials such as car parts, plastic bottles, and pipes, which the actors used in real time to create organic sounds. This approach, in addition to enriching the soundscape, heightened the work's symbolism, emphasizing the theme of creativity in the face of scarcity. To complement the African musical patchwork, djembe drums, rattles, and vocal arrangements employing human voices for sound effects and harmonic phrasing were also used. Significantly, the traditional orchestration was abandoned, instead employing musicians as additional actors, creating a bridge between the narrative and the soundscape. This approach enhanced immersion and directly engaged the audience.

'Mama Will Provide' is a song whose rhythmic structure is based on African djembes, bongos, and rattles, giving it a pulsating rhythm intended to convey the liveliness of Ti Moune's conversation with the goddess Asaka. Additional recycled instruments emphasize the connection to the earth, a theme also conveyed lyrically. Stephen Flaherty's composition draws heavily on trance-like elements of African musical traditions, always underpinned by a powerful rhythm section, creating a multi-layered texture of interwoven sounds. Dramatically, this song is a moment of transformation from fear to trust through interaction with a rhythmic ostinato that introduces the mood of tribal life.

The second, crucial composition is 'Ti Moune's Dance,' which is set in the story as a dance by the protagonist trying to gain acceptance from the white aristocracy. Drummer Mariana Ramirez spoke about her drum kit in an interview with *The Miller Machine*: 'This is a unique hybrid drum kit that combines the basic structure of the instrument with nutshells, hand drums, and bells' (Miller, 2024).

The instrument's hybridity is used to create cultural drama through sudden tempo changes, synchronous beats with the protagonist's movements, and acoustic effects imitating heartbeats and rapid breathing. In this context, 'Ti Moune's' dance is not just a performance, but an attempt to transcend class boundaries using cultural tools. It must therefore be said that this moment in the musical is not merely a scene that attracts the audience's attention, but also a reinforcement of the central theme: the question of humanity's place in a world full of divisions.

Once on This Island is an example of performance art that, in its narrative and musical layer, attempts to tell a story strongly marked by African influences, both through the selection of instruments that evoke the spirit of tradition passed down through generations, and through the synchronous presentation of bodies moving to the rhythm. The music, in a subtle yet equally conscious way for the audience, co-creates the story, becoming the voice of those who have been historically marginalized.

Final conclusions

An analysis of the three musicals outlined above reveals the complex yet coherent role of African instrumentation in contemporary musical theatre. Regardless of the authors' chosen approach, the sounds of drums, rattles, and djembe shape not only the acoustic layer but also the political and symbolic dimension. In each case, the boundary between orchestra pit and stage is blurred, transforming theatricality into a ritual in which every audience member participates.

In an era of globalization, blurring intercultural boundaries, musical performances can serve not only a recreational purpose but also connect audiences from around the world, becoming an educational space that adapts African instruments to explore their role in interpreting cultural identity. A contemporary musical with ethnic elements is not only about introducing a unique layer of sound but rather represents an important step towards equitable representation in popular culture, thus overcoming the long-standing marginalization of these narratives.

African instruments also serve as a vehicle for cultural memory, with a significant emphasis on values related to ancestors, spirits, and the characters' inner transformations. With their help, musical theatre can tell human stories that resonate with a resonance and power that transcends the spectacle. As Fela Kuti himself, an artist whose work used African music as a tool of revolution and hope, said: 'Music is a weapon. Music is a weapon of the future' (Forrest, 2024).

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