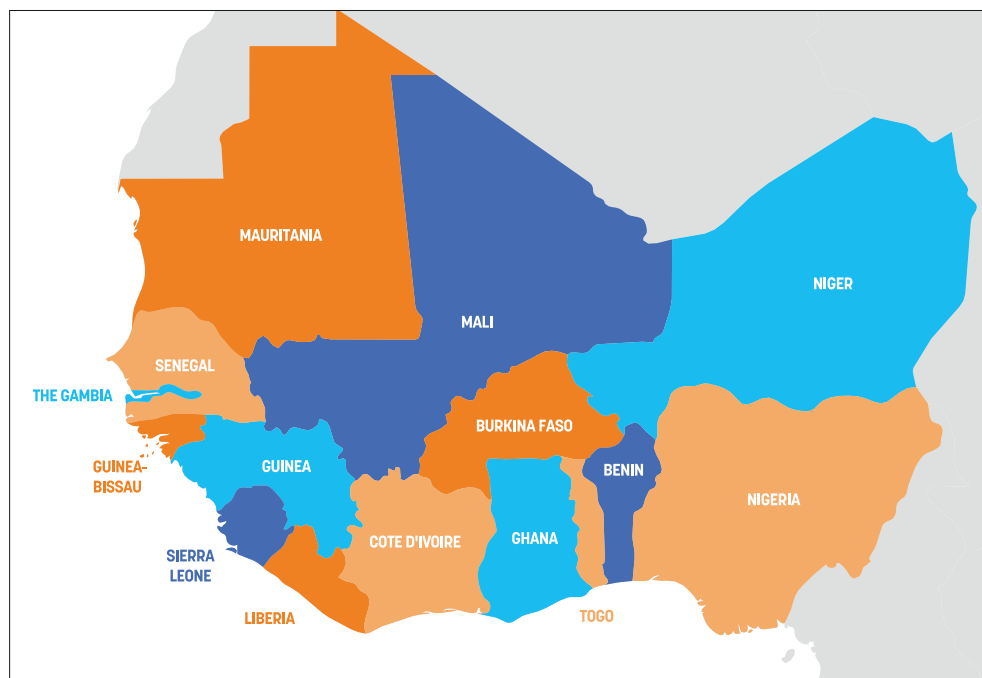


# World tour: popular music from West Africa

Simon Rushby

## Introduction

The previous stop on our World Tour series was the Middle East (*Music Teacher*, March 2021), and for our fifth resource of the series we cross the Red Sea and head west to explore some of the popular music of Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and the Gambia. These countries are situated in West Africa and though they are not all neighbours, they all have coastlines on the Atlantic. Ghana and Nigeria are situated on the Gulf of Guinea.



West Africa is a crucially important region in the development of musical styles worldwide. Countless musical genres and cultures have been influenced by music from this area, which comprises some 17 countries, each one with its own ancient, deeply embedded musical traditions. Although it's true to point to the slave trade as one of the key reasons for the spread of West African music to Europe and the Americas, the development of recorded and broadcast media – and, of course, the internet – has also allowed people from outside the region to learn much more about it. The immense and often brutal colonisation of the region by Europeans in the 19th century also had a big influence on its culture.

Now, West African traditional music has become a mainstay in our school music classrooms, with instruments like the djembe, balafon, kora and mbira (all of which come from this region) quite familiar to Western music students and teachers. We'll undoubtedly touch on many aspects of the long tradition of West African singing, drumming and other instrumental music, our main focus here will be on some of the popular styles of the last century or so, notably **highlife**, **juju**, **afrobeat** and **mbalax**. Within these styles, we'll find plenty of opportunities for listening, performing and composing activities for Key Stage 3 music lessons, and hopefully see the influence and relevance of these genres to music that your students will already know.

Before that, though, let's get a general overview of the musical culture of the region.

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## West African musical culture

Music in West Africa is largely an oral tradition – there is little notation, and the structure of a piece of music is partly pre-organised and partly improvised, often with a leader directing the ensemble through their own playing or singing. There's a very close relationship between music and language, not just in singing but in all forms where music is used for communication and celebration.

One of the most important traditions is that of the **griots** – artists who tell stories, lead praise, recount history and make social commentary using music and spoken word. Griots are authors, poets and musicians, often kora or balafon players and almost always singers, held in high esteem within their communities.

### Listening activity: characteristics of West African music

Before we start our main focus, we can use a listening activity to get students to think about some of the shared musical characteristics of West African music. Since these characteristics can be found in vocal and instrumental music, I've picked general and quite diverse traditional examples from across the region.

As your students watch or listen to the first two to three minutes of each of these examples, get them to discuss and note down similarities. To guide their listening, ask them to think about approaches to the elements of music, particularly **melody, rhythm** and **texture**, as well as **instruments** and **playing styles**. What adjectives can they find to describe these elements that are true to all three of the examples? See if they can use musical vocabulary in their answers as much as possible.

- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdBRuHuUhJo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdBRuHuUhJo): a percussion group based in Koroussa, Guinea, show the relationship between language and drumming. They chant a number of rhythms before playing them on talking drums and djembes.
- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSE\\_UMSi8pA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSE_UMSi8pA): a performance featuring balafon and various percussion.
- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqbVaCQ5luM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqbVaCQ5luM): a beautiful song from the Gambia, featuring the kora (pictured on page 1) – a popular West African string instrument that is part lute, part harp.

Once your students have got a few ideas, draw them together to make a list of features that will help identify music as specifically 'West African'. This list will be similar to one made for – say – South or East African music, as well as much of jazz and pop music from all around the world. It might look something like this:

- ▶ Call and response
- ▶ Repetition
- ▶ Improvisation
- ▶ Short motifs – melodic or rhythmic
- ▶ Variation of texture and timbre
- ▶ Polyphonic and polyrhythmic textures, including the use of cross-rhythm
- ▶ Leadership from one musician, who might play solos and direct the other members of the ensemble
- ▶ Use of percussion instruments, stringed instruments and voice
- ▶ Upbeat rhythmic style, ideal for dancing

We can check back to this list at various points throughout our West African journey. To emphasise the influence that African music has had on popular musical culture all around the world, you could look back at this list and ask your students to highlight any of the features on it that are also true for current commercial pop music – you could even listen to a current hit to identify them. The answer will probably be all of them!

## Unpacking polyrhythm

Drumming has been an important part of African life for hundreds of years, both for communication and as an accompaniment to celebrations, religious ceremonies and festivities. There is a diverse variety of drums, with different names depending on their regional or tribal context, but there are also some common ones, such as the **djembe** and the **talking drum**. Some are played with the hands, others with sticks, and there is a great range of shakers, bells and rattles common to African music.

African drummers have a wide array of playing styles and can obtain many different timbres from their instruments. Each ensemble will have a leader, known as a **master drummer**, who signals starts, stops and changes either through spoken word or prearranged rhythmic patterns. There will be calls with set responses, repeating rhythmic patterns and improvised solos.



When all the drummers are playing, the result is rhythmically very exciting. This is because **polymetre**, **polyrhythm** and **cross-rhythm** form vital parts of African drumming style. While individual drummers may repeat the same pattern, this pattern will interlock with others producing a highly complex aural effect. We're not going to focus too much on drumming in this resource, but the rhythmic concept behind African drumming is crucial to all the musical genres we're going to meet, so let's have a quick, easy performing activity to help understand polyrhythm better.

**Polyrhythmic performing activities**

This is something you can present to the whole class, divided into groups, before breaking into small ensembles.

There are many resources and examples of African polymetre, polyrhythm and cross-rhythm. What many refer to as ‘polyrhythm’ is actually polymetre – the concept of confusing the metre by placing two or more rhythms against each other so that the strong first beat of the bar is ‘thrown’. Often the main rhythm will emphasise a secondary beat rather than the conventional first or third beat of the bar, causing the listener to misinterpret the rhythm.

There are some good examples of this in Western pop music and jazz. Play your class these three snippets and ask them to tap/clap the metre as they listen. There will probably be confusion!

- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFoHhrwlwpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFoHhrwlwpo): the introduction to ‘Sex on Fire’ by Kings of Leon has a guitar riff that gives a misleading signal as to where the first beat of the bar is – get students to tap along from the beginning until the drums come in. Did they get it right?
- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=htgr3pvBr-I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htgr3pvBr-I): likewise, the introduction to ‘Hold the Line’ by Toto uses accents to ‘throw’ the pulse before the drums enter.
- ▶ [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXTvUoKtdzE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXTvUoKtdzE): finally, the ending (listen from around 2:33 to the end) of ‘Whisper Your Name’ by jazz-funk singer Harry Connick Jr sets two metres against one another – the drums play 7/4 time while the rest of the band plays in 7/8. These two metres ‘meet’ at the end to create an exciting, if rhythmically complex finale.

Polyrhythm, as found in much African music, is about two or more rhythms *within* each single bar – such as a **4:3** or a **3:2** ratio – and they always coincide on the first beat of the bar. These polyrhythms have become common in quite a lot of Western music too – for example, the 3:2 ratio is often seen in the form of **triplets** against **quavers**. Let’s start with that one.

Get half your class to tap triplets:

Then get the other half to clap quavers:

Put the two together, by starting one rhythm and adding the second.

You can then challenge the students to perform the polyrhythm individually, with one hand tapping triplets and the other tapping quavers. The resulting rhythm fits well with the phrase 'Nice cup of tea':

$\text{♩} = 60$   
 $\frac{2}{4}$  Nice cup tea nice cup tea  
 $\frac{2}{4}$  Nice of nice of

$\text{♩} = 60$   
 $\frac{2}{4}$  Nice cup of tea nice cup of tea

Try the same process with the more challenging 4:3 polyrhythm - quavers against triplet crotchets. This one fits with the phrase 'Pass the bread and butter':

$\text{♩} = 60$   
 $\frac{4}{4}$  Pass the and ter pass the and ter  
 $\frac{4}{4}$  Pass bread but pass bread but

As an extension, students could break into groups and experiment (maybe with percussion) with different polyrhythms. A lot of African drumming performances will bring these in and out at different times, to create different textures and rhythmic emphases. They could also try the effect created by **phasing** the same rhythm, something popular in a lot of early minimalist music such as *Clapping Music* by **Steve Reich**:

$\text{♩} = 70$   
 $\frac{3}{2}$

## Highlife

Earlier I mentioned colonisation as an influence on West African musical development, and this was very true in the rise of popular music in the region. ‘Popular’ is meant here in its broadest sense: the four genres we will focus on in the remainder of this resource are not particularly modern but they have resonated with huge numbers of people in their countries of origin and in the wider area.

**Highlife** is probably the oldest of the four, beginning in the 19th century in Ghana during the early days of British occupation. Its roots are probably in the culture of the **Akan** people, a widely dispersed and large ethnic group that made up a significant proportion of those captured and transported to Europe and the Americas as slaves.

In its early forms in the 1920s, highlife was popular as a form of dance music played mainly by local musicians for the entertainment of the high-class people on Ghana’s Gold Coast, hence its name. Accra was a popular port, and its thriving trade brought sailors from all over the world to Ghana’s shores. Musical genres, instruments and dance styles from America and Europe infiltrated local culture and dance bands fused them with local rhythms.

Later, as highlife spread among working people, it became hugely popular in a number of other West African countries, particularly post-war Nigeria, where it became the favoured music of the **Igbo** and **Yoruba** people, two very large ethnic groups who account for the majority of the Nigerian population.

Highlife’s heyday was the 1950s, and its best-known performers enjoyed much success. Our listening activity focuses on Ghanaian artist **ET Mensah**, who became known as the ‘king of highlife’, even appearing on stage with jazz legend Louis Armstrong when the latter visited Ghana in 1956. Mensah is often seen as one of the founding fathers of African popular music.

### Listening activity: ‘Yabomisa’ by ET Mensah and the Tempos

Listen to ‘Yabomisa’ here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV8W8KFSxfU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV8W8KFSxfU)

Questions for discussion in pairs/small groups:

- ▶ What percussion instruments can you name or describe?
- ▶ What features of African music can you recognise in this music?
- ▶ What other part of the world does this music remind you of?
- ▶ What features of the music of this other part of the world can you hear?
- ▶ Why would this music have been popular at parties and celebrations?
- ▶ Based on this example, what would you say are the main characteristics of highlife?

Highlife is best described as a blend of West African and Cuban traditional music. Once they’ve identified the Caribbean as a strong influence, you could ask students to complete a table something like this:

West African features	Cuban/Western features
Local languages	Son clave rhythm
Call and response	Bongos, congas and timbales
Polyrhythm	Electric guitar and bass
Short repeated motifs	Simple I-IV-V harmonic structure
African drums	Saxophones/trombones
Chanting	Improvised solos (especially horns)
Drum improvisations	

A previous *World Tour* resource, from *Music Teacher* September 2020, focused on the music of Cuba, particularly **rumba** which is a strong influence on highlife.

**Performing and composing activity: highlife**

The simple repeating patterns of highlife provide a good opportunity for a performing, composing and improvising session. Below, I've broken 'Yabomisa' up into its component parts to provide inspiration either for a class performance of it, or a creative exercise making your own highlife song.

Key ingredients of 'Yabomisa' are:

- ▶ A repeating chord progression, using chords I, II and V with added notes. The electric guitar picks this out with frequent anticipations – I've suggested two patterns below:

Chords: C, C<sup>7</sup>, Dm, C/G, G<sup>7</sup>

Electric Guitar (simplified)

Electric Guitar (advanced)

- ▶ A simple bassline following the chord pattern. On the recording the bass player sometimes remains on the tonic, creating a **pedal note**, and sometimes plays with a dotted rhythm. The strong first and third beats are always emphasised, however.

Bass Guitar

- ▶ Son clave, shaker and conga rhythms:

Shaker

Claves

Congas

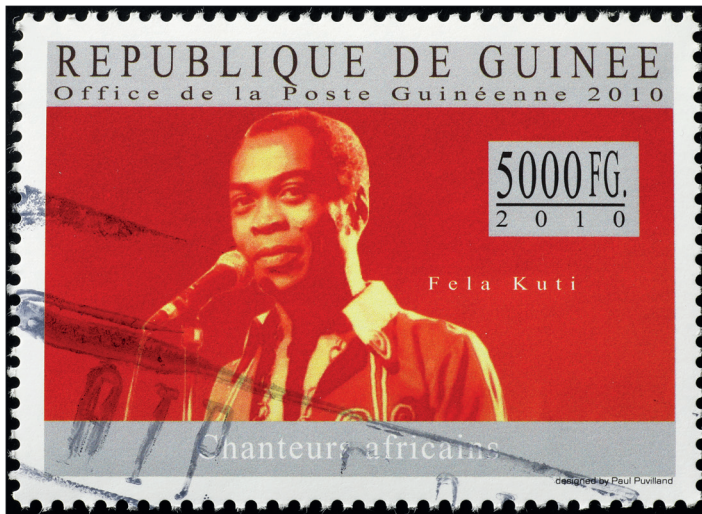
- ▶ A repeating sung **refrain**, which ends on the fourth beat of the bar.

C, C<sup>7</sup>, Dm, C/G, G

Ya - bo - sa sa - wa - le

### Further listening: afrobeat

One way in which highlife evolved in Nigeria was in the development of the very popular **afrobeat** style, championed particularly by Nigerian musician **Fela Kuti**. Afrobeat has influenced a great many Western bands and artists, and is still hugely popular in West Africa. When Kuti died in 1997, over a million people gathered in Lagos, Nigeria for his funeral.



Fela Kuti on a Guinean stamp

This 16-minute video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryTTHmUYc2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryTTHmUYc2o)) is a fantastic summary of afrobeat and Kuti's huge influence. It's well worth showing in a lesson.



### Juju

Highlife enjoyed great popularity in Nigeria in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, until another more guitar-based style evolved from it, and eventually took over as the popular music from the 1960s onwards, following Nigeria's independence. **Juju** combined traditional Yoruba drumming and singing with Christian church-style singing and guitar-based pop music, becoming one of Nigeria's biggest cultural exports in the 1980s.

The worldwide popularity of juju in the 1980s was mainly thanks to the artist **King Sunny Adé**, who focused on the fusion between traditional Yoruba styles and Western rock. Adé started out as a highlife artist but became an important voice in the promotion of working-class Nigerian culture through his music. With his band, **African Beats**, he signed with Island Records (most famous for bringing **Bob Marley** to the world stage) and released a very successful album in 1982 called *Juju Music*, which included synthesisers and drum machines, popular instruments in Western pop music of the time.

#### Discussion activity: juju

Try the first track from the *Juju Music* album 'Ja Funmi', which means 'fight for me' in Yoruba ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBxreBgrJSA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBxreBgrJSA)). Ask your students to describe the music – what instruments feature more prominently, what features of highlife they can hear, and what other musical styles are evident. They might be able to pick out the strong reggae influence – after all, Adé was signed to a Jamaican record label. You could compare this to a Bob Marley song or refer to the World Tour resource on Caribbean music (*Music Teacher*, January 2020).

There's a great live performance from King Sunny Adé and his African Beats from 2009 here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=osNAy1DNkOQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osNAy1DNkOQ)), featuring a huge line-up of instruments, especially guitars! This is a must-watch, if only to get a sense of the energy and joy that Adé and his band bring to their music.

### Mbalax

A genre that fewer people outside of West Africa will know is mbalax, the popular dance music of Senegal and the tiny country that it almost surrounds, the Gambia. One of its leading artists, **Youssou N'Dour**, has enjoyed worldwide fame, collaborating with many Western pop stars such as **Peter Gabriel** and **Bruce Springsteen**. He has used his global fame and success to highlight pressing political and social issues not only in Senegal but across Africa.



Mbalax came to greater prominence in the 1980s thanks to N'Dour, but its roots go much further back to the percussion music of the **Wolof** people (the major ethnic group in Senegal) and particularly their use of the **sabar**, a drum played with both hands and sticks. Bands travelled the country performing for parties and combined their traditional music with songs from Europe and America. When Senegal became independent from France in 1960, these musicians strove to give their sound more of a national identity, using local languages and instruments, and singing local folk songs.

Like highlife and juju, mbalax is a fusion of Senegalese music with Western genres such as jazz, Latin and soul. What distinguishes it from these other West African styles is that its roots are in Arabic modes and Islamic singing, which is generally higher in pitch and more **melismatic** than the Christian praise music that influenced juju, for example.

### Listening exercise: 'Japoulo'

Since his teens, Youssou N'Dour has been lead singer of the best-loved mbalax band in Senegal, **Étoile de Dakar**. This live performance of their song *Japoulo* comes from 1994: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=seDHTgXKP6Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seDHTgXKP6Y)

This listening exercise is based on the first two minutes or so of the performance.

- 1 Describe Youssou N'Dour's vocal part in the introduction, from the beginning until 0:28. Make three points, focusing on pitch, melody and words.
- 2 Apart from instruments, describe three ways in which the music changes from 0:28 (after the vocal introduction).
- 3 Name five Western instruments and two West African instruments (or describe them, if you don't know their names) that you can see and hear in the performance.
- 4 Mbalax is a fusion of West African and Western music. Apart from instruments, describe two features of the music from each of these cultures that you can hear in the extract.

Suggestions for answers:

- 1 High in pitch/falsetto, melismatic, free-tempo, vocalisations (not words), descending, repetitive.
- 2 Four-in-a-bar metre, faster, strict tempo, bassline (electronic), rhythmic singing, dance beats.
- 3 Electric guitar, bass guitar, synths/keyboards, drum kit, saxophone, trumpet (Western); sabar, talking drum, congas, djembes (West African).
- 4 West African language, improvisation, repetition, rhythmic motives, melisma, polyrhythm, call and response, catchy refrain, vocalisations (West African); electric sounds, disco-style drum patterns, riffs, rhythmic strumming, four-in-a-bar metre, catchy melodies (Western).