



MUSICAL MESSENGER



As a performer, James Makubuya has played the instruments of his native Uganda in Carnegie Hall and around the world. As a scholar, he has revealed what those instruments and others tell us about the cultures in which they are built.

But there was a time when they were not considered for serious study.

Makubuya told the story of how that began to change during the Wabash On My Mind podcast, as he prepared to deliver the 40th LaFollette Lecture in the Humanities in September. Makubuya became the first music professor and first black American to receive the honor of giving the College's most prestigious lecture.

When I was in the first grade, growing up in Uganda, I was fascinated by this guy in my village who would play this instrument with one string, aiddle, called an *ndingidi*. Every evening that guy would walk down the road playing thatiddle, and one day I asked my

dad, “What is that instrument?” He didn’t know, so one Sunday afternoon he invited that guy to our home. I asked him why he played, and he said, “To entertain our people, but also to communicate some messages they need to know.”

I asked my dad if the man could teach me to play thatiddle, and he said okay, but after two weeks of him teaching me I found another instrument, a bowl lyre, and that sounded even better, so I switched to it. Then I started looking at instruments from other cultures, and by the time I started high school I was playing four different instruments, plus the piano.

The piano was my main instrument all the way through to my master’s degree at Catholic University in Washington, DC. When I was about to graduate, one of the professors asked me if I played any traditional instruments. When I played the bowl lyre for her, she was amazed. She said, “You play that so well—why do you play the

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piano?” And I said, “In my culture, no one takes our instruments seriously.” She said, “I’m going to connect you with someone so you can advance the study of your instruments,” and that’s how I ended up at the University of California in Los Angeles, studying musicology and organology, and how instruments are built.

I’ve studied instruments from many cultures and found that, just as thatiddle player in my village said, people that play instruments aren’t just after the sound but what that sound communicates. When I learn one instrument and learn how it’s tuned, it connects me to so many cultural elements.