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INSIDE & OUT

African concert a sensory treat

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Special to The Denver Post

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This weekend brings a chance for kids and parents suffering from spring fever to move their feet and clap to a happy rhythm.

Pick Up Sticks Marimba is an African-marimba orchestra that promises to get music lovers of all ages moving and grooving to the beat.

This seven-member group sings and performs on Zimbabwean marimbas — instruments that are similar to large wooden xylophones — along with hand drums, gourd rattles and a Western drum set. At each performance, they expect audience members to get involved.

"You'll learn as you go," says band member Darcie Sanders. "Zimbabwean music has a pattern of call and response, and we'll teach certain clapping rhythms and a few lyrics."

Movement is key to getting the most out of a Pick Up Sticks Marimba show. Audience members catch on fast.

"If your kid wants to jump up in the aisle and clap and dance," Sanders says, "no one is going to shush that child."

Sanders was drawn to the marimba's "warm wooden voices" after seeing a performance by members of Boulder's Kutandara Center, a community-based music school. She took music classes there to learn the marimba and met the other members of Pick Up Sticks. The band formed in 2007 and now performs regularly around Denver and Boulder.

"We're all different ages, and most of us learned the instrument as adults," Sanders says. "It's a wonderful model of the lifelong enjoyment of music."

The Zimbabwean music that Sanders studied and performs is based on the musical traditions of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and South Africa.

"Some of the songs we perform and the melodic traditions go back in an unbroken musical tradition for 2,000 years," she says. "It is still vital today."

Each band member plays multiple marimbas, moving from one to the next between songs.

"The interlocking melodies give (the music) a complexity, so your head likes it," Sanders says. "And it's strongly rhythmic, so your feet like it."

With large marimbas placed around the stage during a show, the result is both musically dramatic and



Pick Up Sticks Marimba has free shows scheduled this weekend in Boulder with an Earth Day theme. Audiences are encouraged to join in and move. (Photo by Robin Truesdale)

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