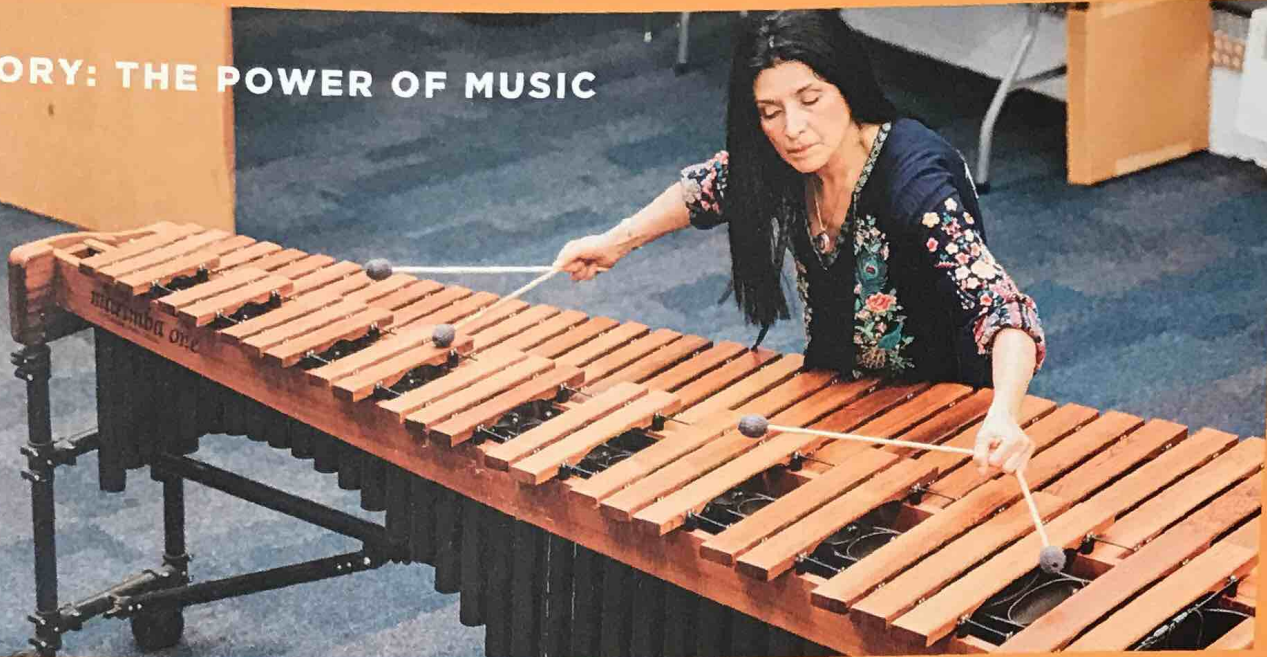




arts digest

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COVER STORY: THE POWER OF MUSIC



In Tune to the Power of Music

Valerie Dee Naranjo, a professor of percussion studies at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, grew up in a Native American family that prioritized music. But when she got her first set of drums as a child in southwestern Colorado, she wasn't a very diligent student.

Her father had stretched his earnings as a mechanic to buy her a "used Rogers drum set in excellent condition," she recalls, but Naranjo, who had just turned 9, "couldn't be bothered with practicing." It took a nudge from her mother, who suggested the drums might be sold to someone more appreciative, to spark her interest. "She said, 'They need a voice,'" Naranjo says. "And, according to her, I was practicing the next day. That began my fascination with music."

That fascination has propelled Naranjo, a renowned percussionist, all over the world: to the University of Colorado, where she first learned about the gyil, a West African instrument that is part of the mallet keyboard family; to Ghana, where she studied with local gyil masters and, in the process, helped overturn a ban that prevented women from playing the instrument in public; to her spot in Studio 8H at Rockefeller Center as a member of the *Saturday Night Live* band; and to Broadway, where she plays as part of *The Lion King's* orchestra (Naranjo was the first musician hired for the long-running production). And she has no interest in slowing down.

"I think the moment in my life that I say, 'I've arrived,' something will let me know that I need to press forward—for my own creative self, for my community," she says.

Indeed, Naranjo credits her community—her father was a member of the Southern Ute tribe—with her understanding of the power and importance of music.

"Music is not only regarded as entertainment; it's regarded as one of the wellsprings of energy," she explains. "A musician is a conduit of culture. When I decided to pursue a career in music, I was given a lot of respect and regard by my community."

Naranjo went to the University of Colorado to study under John Galm, whom she calls "a pioneer of world percussion." There, she met one of his graduate assistants, a student from Ghana, who played the marimba in a way she had never encountered before. The reason? He was playing music created for an instrument she'd never heard of: the gyil.

"He said, 'In Ghana, we have the mother of your marimba,'" she remembers with a laugh. "And that was really enough. Although I'd never heard the instrument itself, I'd heard the music, and that was enough to pique my curiosity."

Naranjo later transferred to the University of Oklahoma to study music education and then went to Ithaca College for a graduate degree in performance. She decided to research the gyil for a class and was surprised at the relative lack of information on the instrument. In 1988, she traveled to Ghana to learn more and stumbled into a music festival where, after hearing her play the gyil, the local chief, who had been exposed to greater gender parity as a student in London, decided to lift a ban on female gyil players. Since then, Naranjo has returned to Ghana nearly every year to study and play, most recently as a guest artist on gyil with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana.

"My first journey to Ghana definitely imparted to me the message: don't hold back," she says. "Do what you're supposed to do. Follow your muse."

Now at NYU, Naranjo and other arts faculty recently wrapped up a three-year Global Institute for Advanced Study project called Translucent Borders, which focused on the role of dance and music in intercultural dialogue in the Middle East, Greece, Cuba, and Ghana.

Naranjo—who gave up drum sets as a teen because of what she claims are clumsy feet—teaches West African music, dance, and song (including the gyil, marimba, and djembe) to her students in Steinhardt's Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions. On a recent Friday in the percussion studio, she moved effortlessly from one instrument to another, at one point breaking into a song that is traditionally sung at Upper West Ghanaian funerals, which celebrate the life of the deceased.

In the classroom, Naranjo says she has a "democratic" style. "In other words, there is a mentor—someone who has a little bit more information—but everyone who has decided to take up the art harnesses some responsibility," she explains. "Even if you only know a phrase or two, you can teach that phrase to someone else."

Those are lessons Naranjo says she's learned from her own professional experiences, including with the *Saturday Night Live* band and orchestra for *The Lion King* on Broadway. "We're not in this to compete with one another," she says. "We're in this to help one another."

—Rebecca Beyer

Valerie Dee Naranjo playing the gyl, a West African instrument made from wooden slats suspended over calabash gourds.

