

# World Dances



## Lesson – *Rhythm & Steady Beat in African Music*

Companion Video - “Akinla” from *African Suite for String Orchestra*

### Suggested Grade Level

Grades 1-4

### Objective

Students will identify and explore rhythm and steady beat through the African highlife music of composer Fela Sowande. They will understand rhythm in African drum music and make connections to musical characteristics in other cultures.

### Suggested Materials

- Video of the BPO performing Fela Sowande’s “Akinla” from *African Suite for String Orchestra* and dance & drum performance by the African American Cultural Center
- Composer fact sheet (provided)

### New York State Arts Standards

MU:Cr2.1.1a-4a	DA:Cr1.1.1b-4b	DA:Pr4.1.1c-4c
MU:Cr3.2.1a-4a	DA:Cr2.1.1a-4a	DA:Pr5.1.1a-4a
MU:Pr4.2.1a-4a	DA:Cr2.1.1b-4b	DA:Re8.1.1a-4a
MU:Pr4.2.1b-4b	DA:Cr3.1.1b-4b	DA:Cn10.1.1b-4b
MU:Re7.2.1a-4a	DA:Pr4.1.1a-4a	DA:Cn11.1.1a-4a
MU:Cn10.1.1c-4c	DA:Pr4.1.1b-4b	

### New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Reading, Standard 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5  
Speaking & Listening, Standard 1, 2, 4 & 6  
Language, Standard 1, 2, 4 & 6

### New York State Physical Education Standards

Standard 1, 2 & 4

### Procedure

Rhythm in music makes us want to get up and dance! Pulse is the heartbeat of music and compels us to move.

- 1) Have students read through the composer fact sheet provided. Ask students where they might hear African drums being played. How is rhythm used in dancing? What sort of musical characteristics or instruments are common to dance music?



## Lesson – *Rhythm & Steady Beat in African Music* (continued)

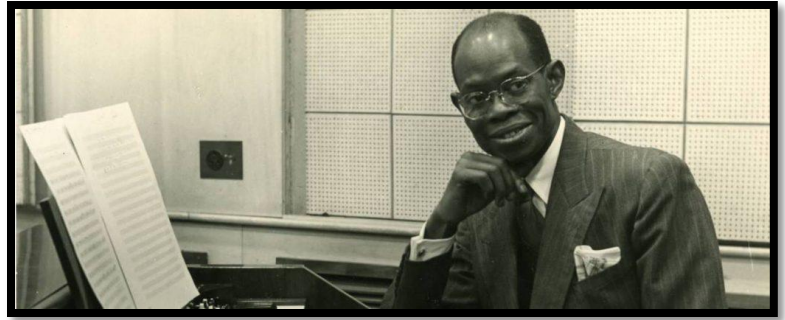
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- 2) Have students watch the BPO video of “Akinla.” Encourage them to keep the steady beat by tapping their foot or drumming along to the music. How would it feel to dance to this music? What sort of movements does the music evoke?
- 3) Have students watch and listen to the dance and drum performance by the African American Cultural Center. Why would drums be a good instrument for dancing? What other types of music or dance use drums to keep a steady beat? Why do you think the dancers are barefoot? What are some of the emotions you feel the dancers are trying to express? How does the music make you feel?
- 4) Have students create their own dance to the music in “Akinla.” These dances can be recorded and then shared with the class. Ask students to explain why they chose certain movements and the emotions/mood they are trying to express through their dance.



## Fela Sowande

Chief Olufela Obafunmilayo (Fela) Sowande was a Nigerian musician and composer known for his organ, choral and orchestral works. He was born in 1905 in Abeokuta near Lagos in Nigeria to a Nigerian priest and church musician. Sowande studied organ and sang in his father's church. At this time, he was also a bandleader, playing jazz and popular highlife music, all of which had significant influence on his own musical compositions.



In 1934, Sowande went to London to study European classical and popular music at the Royal Society of Organists. He gained a Bachelor of Music from the University of London and Fellow of Trinity College of Music. Some of his early accomplishments included solo pianist in a performance of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, part of a pianist duo with Fats Waller, and theatre organist for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Sowande's music itself combines his background and education in the organ works of Handel and Bach, church choral traditions, and the music of his own African heritage. His works incorporate West African techniques into Western classical-style orchestral pieces. His *African Suite for String Orchestra* demonstrates African rhythmic and harmonic characteristics. The final movement of the suite, "Akinla," became known to Canadian audiences as the theme of the popular Canadian Broadcasting Corporation music program *Gilmour's Albums*, and is now a Canadian orchestral standard.

## Highlife Music

Highlife is a music genre that originated in present-day Ghana in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during its history as a colony of the British Empire. It uses the melodic and main rhythmic structures of traditional African music, but is played on Western instruments. Highlife music gained popularity in Nigeria following World War II where it experienced a transformation through the inclusion of asymmetrical drum rhythms taken from traditional African drumming practices, combined with syncopated guitar melodies. "Akinla" is reflective of a popular highlife tune.