

Challenges in instrument making - January 2025

Focus on grenadilla wood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), the wood of clarinets and oboes

Dalbergia melanoxylon, more commonly known as Mozambique Ebony, Grenadilla wood or Mpingo in Swahili, has been the material of choice for over 200 years in the manufacture of professional-quality wind instruments such as clarinets, oboes and flutes. At the start of 2025, instrument-making professionals are sounding the alarm: production of clarinets and oboes - major French and European specialties - in France and Europe is severely disrupted, and could come to a standstill in the coming months if the restrictions on wood imports implemented only in the EU since the beginning of 2023 persist.

The musical instruments sector is an exemplary one, perfectly traceable, reasoned and sustainable. It would be particularly regrettable to hinder this responsible activity, which enhances the value of wood, because of the existence of illegal trafficking. Such a decision would give free rein to an illegal, uncontrolled and unsustainable trade. It is inconceivable that a sector that is an integral part of French and European cultural heritage, with responsible and rigorously controlled practices, could be penalized, or even banned, in the face of the reality of illegal trafficking.

A European cultural heritage

Musical instruments, especially those used in classical music such as the clarinet, oboe and bow, originated in Europe. They are the result of centuries of work by musicians and instrument makers, who have developed exceptional expertise over the years. The materials used in their manufacture, and in particular the types of wood, are chosen to create instruments of the highest quality that can be used for decades, even centuries. Indeed, in many cases, the instrument's evolution to the final form we know today was made possible by the particular technical properties of the material used. The clarinet and oboe as we know them today are closely linked to the exceptional properties of *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, just as the bow is with pernambuco. Access to wood resources such as *Dalbergia Melanoxylon* is essential for industry professionals, who have been working for many years to promote responsible consumption of this resource and support replanting programs.

Wood sourcing in Europe: an immediate challenge

Since January 2023, representatives of the European CITES authorities have been operating according to new criteria developed by the SRG, the European scientific authority.

These new criteria were implemented without prior consultation with, or even notification of, timber suppliers and importers. This made it impossible for professionals to prepare themselves to meet the new criteria, which inevitably led to delays and blockages in the import of CITES-listed timber into Europe.

These additional delays and repeated import blockages have had, and continue to have, a direct impact on the production of European companies. Any deterioration in their wood stocks has a direct impact on their manufacturing standards and production capacity. Like, for example, the reduction in drying and resting times between the various operations required to produce durable, high-quality instruments.

This scientific and administrative pressure is being felt ever more keenly within the European Union, and the wood-exporting countries that are subject to it regularly raise their voices to be heard. But the European Union's scientific authority remains inflexible, thus directly contributing to the perfectly unfair competitive situation in which European instrument manufacturers now find themselves in relation to manufacturers in the rest of the world.

Today, it's the century-old, internationally recognized and leading French wind instrument companies that are in trouble for importing *Dalbergia melanoxylon*.

An entire ecosystem is in jeopardy. With French and European manufacturers in the front line, and soon orchestras, music schools and musicians the world over.

These difficulties, linked to the new criteria introduced by the European Union, mainly concern *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, and therefore wind instruments. To a lesser extent, however, they also apply to other types of wood used in other instrument families (guitars, marimba, etc.). **The entire European musical instrument sector is therefore concerned and at risk.**

If this situation and the difficulties in sourcing raw materials persist, we can expect to see **the closure or relocation of these companies** with century-old European know-how, as they will no longer be able to manufacture their instruments and will face disproportionate competition from companies in the rest of the world (notably the USA and Asia) who are not subject to the same CITES restrictions.

A French and European industry with measured, constant and sustainable needs that does not jeopardize the resource but enhances the value of wood and contributes to its conservation.

The *Dalbergia melanoxylon* used by French manufacturers comes exclusively from Mozambique and Tanzania, two countries where this species is abundant and where a legal supply chain exists, with FSC-certified suppliers following forest management plans, cutting and export quotas. Demand for *Dalbergia melanoxylon* for the manufacture of wind musical instruments has been stable for several decades, and does not exceed a few hundred cubic meters per year, whereas the *Hung Mu*¹ furniture industry uses thousands or even tens of thousands of cubic meters per year. So it's not this sector that's damaging *Dalbergia melanoxylon* populations or contributing to the proliferation of illegal trade.

What's more, it has been established that the use of a wood species for the manufacture of high-value-added objects - such as musical instruments - contributes directly to its preservation. In effect, this attributes a special value to the species, which encourages its preservation and local development. This is what the NGO ABCP in Tanzania is committed to (see below).

ABCP² a replanting and enhancement program for the species supported by the French instrument-making industry

African Blackwood Conservation Project was founded in 1996 by Sebastian Chuwa (now deceased), a botanist from the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania, and James Harris, a woodturning artist from the USA. They were brought together by a 1992 BBC television program entitled "Mpingo - The Tree That Makes Music". This documentary was the first to focus on the *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, drawing the attention of the international community to the significant threats to its future survival due to over-exploitation and the lack of adequate conservation measures to ensure its preservation.

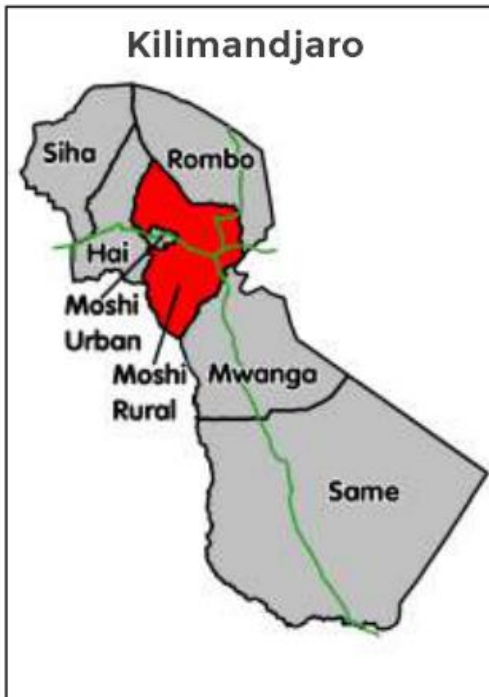
Thanks to Sebastian Chuwa, a method has been developed on site which enables the *Dalbergia melanoxylon* to be replanted and grown successfully. And ABCP has always relied on local people to take care of the seedlings. By 2024 - almost 30 years after ABCP was founded - around 2 million Mpingos trees had been planted, along with over 4 million other indigenous species, in churches, schools, farms and other institutions in 5 districts of northern Tanzania. Monitoring is carried out by each of the stakeholders to ensure that the trees and nurseries are thriving.

ABCP's work has been a real success, and continues today with Sébastien Chuwa's successors. The NGO has been supported by CSFI and French musical instrument manufacturers for several years.

¹ "Hung Mu" (or Hong Mu in modern transcription) designates a category of precious and exotic woods used mainly in China for the manufacture of high-quality traditional furniture, as well as objets d'art and decorative elements.

² ABCP "African Blackwood Conservation Project" <https://www.blackwoodconservation.org/>

Reforestation of Kilimanjaro³



Mt. Kilimanjaro is the tallest free-standing mountain in the world, ascending from a semi-arid plain at around 700m (2296 ft) to its summit at 5895m (19,341 ft). It is one of the (mostly dormant) volcanoes that erupted during the formation of the East Africa Rift System. Many of the planting sites of the ABCP lie within the Mt. Kilimanjaro watershed which feeds the waters of the Pangani River Basin that travels from its headwaters in Mt. Meru and Kilimanjaro to its outlet at the Indian Ocean, a distance of 500km (310 mi). The water supplied to the dryland plains along its course is vital for the maintenance of agriculture, cattle grazing and human occupation. Therefore it is of crucial importance that the forests and soil of the mountain remain in good health because they act as mechanisms for catchment and storage. Part of the work of the ABCP has been to supply seedlings for reforestation on Kilimanjaro. Since its lower slopes are heavily populated and dedicated to growing coffee, bananas and subsistence foods, the ABCP cooperates with communities and school groups on the mountain, supplying species for reforestation and domestic needs.

African blackwood's natural habitat is in the lowland plains surrounding Kilimanjaro, as well as the watershed along the Pangani River. In these areas the ABCP supplies seedlings to numerous farmers and community groups which have available acreages of land in which to plant the trees in more protected environments than public forests. On the map of Districts in Kilimanjaro Region at right, Mt. Kilimanjaro lies between Siha, Hai, Moshi, and Rombo. The Pangani River runs southeast through the Districts of Mwangi and Same.

***Dalbergia melanoxylon*, a black wood with specific qualities**

Dalbergia melanoxylon is a precious wood whose qualities have been known for thousands of years. Evidence of its use dates back to Egyptian times (5000 BC). Excavations of the tombs of the Pharaohs reveal that this wood was used to make objets d'art and furniture for the ruling class of the time. It was also used to make figurines and ritual objects. Because of its hardness, it was also used in temple construction.

Dalbergia melanoxylon is found in Tutankhamun's gilded wooden shrine. It was also used to make Egyptian harps.

This use of the material has continued over the centuries right up to the present day, proving that it is one of the most important artistic materials the world has ever known.

***Dalbergia melanoxylon* and instrument making**

A meeting at the beginning of the 19th century was to mark the evolution of modern instruments and the development of the great French tradition of wind instrument making, as well as its establishment on the banks of the Seine in Mantes la Ville.

European wind instruments were traditionally made from European boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*), as it was then one of the densest woods available in Europe. Although its density makes it useful for wind instruments, its tendency to warp over time, even when well dried, is a limiting factor. It was the use of *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, thanks to its incredible dimensional stability, high density and great mechanical strength, that made it possible to create the modern oboe and clarinet with its current keywork. It is the intrinsic mechanical

³ Source: 2019-ABCP-Newsletter-Color: <https://www.blackwoodconservation.org/abcp-newsletter-archive/>

qualities of this wood that have considerably enhanced the quality, ease of use and durability of these instruments.

Conclusion

Dalbergia melanoxylon, a precious wood used in instrument making, is at the heart of a delicate balance between preserving natural resources, complying with international regulations and passing on an age-old cultural heritage. A material of excellence, it remains indispensable for guaranteeing the quality and durability of clarinets and oboes, emblems of the European and French musical tradition.

Today, new European restrictions, applied without prior consultation, pose a major risk to this sector of excellence. They threaten not only historic companies and unique know-how, but also access to music for generations of musicians.

We also need to work closely and constructively with **Mozambique** and **Tanzania**, the main producing countries. These efforts aim to support them in preserving this species and bringing it into line with **CITES** requirements, notably in terms of export quotas and sustainable resource management. The aim is twofold: to guarantee a legal and sustainable supply of *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, while ensuring balanced economic and environmental development for these countries.

The ongoing commitment of manufacturers, as demonstrated by their support for programs such as **ABCP**, demonstrates that responsible consumption is possible. By enhancing the value of this precious wood with high value-added instruments, and by helping producer countries to adopt practices that meet international expectations, it is possible to reconcile environmental, economic and cultural imperatives. Preserving *Dalbergia melanoxylon* means not only ensuring the long-term survival of a priceless cultural heritage, but also promoting a virtuous model in which adding value to the resource contributes to its conservation for future generations.

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