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Hello and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps you discover the music of composers, cultures, and traditions from all around the world. I'm Carly, and I'm so glad you're to kick off our special summer series, Around the World with Busy Kids Love Music!

Each summer, we explore the folk music of five different countries, collecting passport stamps as we go. Today we're heading to the Horn of Africa to discover the incredible sounds of... Ethiopia!

Ethiopia has one of the oldest and most unique musical traditions in the world. Its music sounds very different from what we're used to in Western styles. That's because it often uses special scales, called Qignit/Kinit, that give the melodies a mysterious and beautiful sound. There are four main qignit scales used in traditional Ethiopian music, and they don't follow the major or minor scales you may have heard in piano lessons or other classical music. One of the commonly used kinit is the Tizita scale, which also has a major and minor version. Let's listen to an example of the Tizita minor scale played on a bass guitar:

But music in Ethiopia isn't just about notes—it's also deeply connected to history, celebration, faith, and storytelling.

Let's start by learning about a few of the traditional instruments used in Ethiopian folk music.

First up is the krar, a six-stringed lyre that looks a little like a small harp. It's often strummed or plucked while a singer performs a song, and it's popular among folk musicians across Ethiopia. The krar can be played gently to accompany a soft ballad or rhythmically during a dance tune. It's been used for centuries and is still played today.

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Next is the masenqo, a one-stringed fiddle. That's right—just one string! But the masenqo is full of emotion. Musicians play it with a bow, and it can mimic the sound of a singing voice. It's often used by traditional story-singers called azmari, who perform songs with messages about love, politics, or history. Listen to this clip of the masengo being played – you won't believe how many different sounds a one-stringed fiddle can produce!

I was able to see one of these simple but beautiful instruments in the musical instruments collection at The Met the last time I was in New York City. The one I viewed there was made of horsehair, and I learned that traditionally, only men play this instrument.

And then there's the washint, a bamboo flute used mostly in the highland regions of Ethiopia.

The washint adds a light and airy sound, sometimes imitating birdsong or wind. Each region might play the washint differently, and some washint players are said to perform with multiple flutes.

Ethiopian folk music isn't just a thing of the past—it's still very much alive today. At weddings, holidays, and religious ceremonies, you'll hear music and dancing that reflect centuries of tradition. Different ethnic groups in Ethiopia—there are over 80!—each have their own musical styles and dances.

One of the most popular dance styles is called eskista, which involves lots of shoulder movements and quick footwork. There's no other dance quite like it in the world!

Modern Ethiopian musicians often combine traditional instruments and scales with modern sounds like keyboards, guitars, and drum kits to create new music that still honors the past. This mix of old and new is what makes Ethiopian music so exciting and important.

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This music will really come to life if you go to the episode's show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/151 and view the playlist I've linked for you on YouTube. You'll be able to see the dances – such as the ancient eskita dance – and the instruments I've described for you in this episode. And now that we've explored the sounds of Ethiopia, it's time to add a new stamp to your musical passport! You can download the printable passport stamp for Ethiopia at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/151 as well.

Thank you for joining me on today's musical journey. Next week, we'll hop to a brand new part of the world to discover more amazing folk music.

Until then... keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music! Bye for now!