

Toumani Diabaté & The London Symphony Orchestra ***Kôrôlén – ‘ancestral’***

It was 1986 when Gambian *kora* master Amadu Bansang Jobarteh made a three day journey by train to visit his Malian nephew Sidiki Diabaté, the principal *kora* player of the *Ensemble Instrumental Nacional du Mali*, known in Mali as “The King of the Kora.”

It would be the first time the two *kora* masters had met since after the second world war when Sidiki left The Gambia for his family's ancestral home in Mali. The visit would unite the Malian side of the Diabaté family with the Gambian, a reunion of two of the strongest lineages in the eight hundred year old tradition of the Mandé *griot* musicians.

The evenings in the Diabaté's Bamako compound would often be spent listening to Sidiki playing the *kora*, a twenty-one-string gourd resonated harp. The old master would sometimes sing the songs of the *griots*, but usually preferred to let the women sing; his role being simply to accompany them while periodically erupting into the idiomatic *kora* embellishments known as *birimintingo*.

His young son Toumani, only twenty years old at the time, was learning his father's accompaniments, as well as this *birimintingo* style of bullet-fast notes bursting forth between vocal phrases, but his playing had also started to echo the lyrical singing of his mother, Nene Koita, and his step-mother Mariam Kouyaté. Thirty years later Toumani would describe this new instrumental lyricism as he looked up while playing his *kora* at his home in Bamako: "Look, the *kora* is singing."

One could say that these elements of Mandé music did not co-exist on a single instrument before Toumani Diabaté brought them onto the solo *kora*: accompaniment, *birimintingo* and song, all these elements in one place, on one instrument, from the hands of one musician. But the world had not yet heard this new solo music and would have to wait for Toumani to perform in London in 1987, where he recorded one of African music's great masterpieces, an album called *Kaira*, the Mandé word for peace.

The album, produced by Lucy Durán, was recorded in a single session in London that summer. It catalogued the central pieces of the Mandé *kora*, a repertoire which began in the Mali empire some eight hundred years ago with Sunjata Keita, who called together musicians (known as *jeli* or *griots*) to sing his praises and to tell the story of the founding of his empire.

The magic of the 21-year-old Toumani's playing on this recording finds its immediate comparison, in the world of classical music, with Bach's solo violin *Ciaccona*. The *Ciaccona* is a masterpiece of invention using the simplest of means: one harmonic progression expressed over and over again, on an instrument with only four strings; it conjures up a musical world that has fascinated performers and listeners for generations. Similarly, Toumani explores one bassline in each of the five pieces, with a constantly changing melodic invention and rhythmical freedom that demonstrates a seemingly endless musical creativity. This creativity would bring Toumani global renown, not only for his unique solo performances, but also for his collaborations with Ketama, Taj Mahal, Ali Farka Touré and Björk, demonstrating his ability to

find new contexts for his instrument that would find fertile ground in his meeting with conductor Clark Rundell.

Speaking of the recording they would make, captured in a live performance with the LSO at London's Barbican, Toumani says, "African music has a mystic and classical side, a divinity...it is not only about dance, and people need to know this." And with his work, spanning over thirty years, to propel the *kora* onto the global stage, Toumani makes this abundantly clear.

The meeting between Toumani and Clark came about after a suggestion by The Barbican Centre's Bryn Ormrod to bring together Toumani with the esteemed London Symphony Orchestra. The two first met in Manchester in 2008 and then again in Liverpool. Clark remembers Toumani's interest in the possibility of the project, recalling that a highlight of the first meeting was Toumani's insistence that the project begin with something that he had never recorded before: "We have to do something new...I have a tune in my head already." Thankfully Clark was able to record as Toumani played a piece which must have been a distant memory of that time when Amadu and Sidiki reunited in Bamako in 1986, an old praise song that Amadu would often play, a song called *Kata Ndao*. Clark reminisces about a "perfectly formed..structure just effortlessly emerging before my eyes...two very beautiful phrases which Toumani just tells the story around."

The rough recording made in that moment in Manchester was sent to arranger Ian Gardiner, who had already worked with Clark on numerous occasions, an arranger familiar and comfortable in the crossover multi-genre style that this project would require. Ian used the recording as the basis for the first orchestral accompaniment to Toumani's *kora*, the first piece written with a *kora* as a soloist in the symphony orchestra. It was eventually renamed by Toumani as the album's exquisite opening track *Hainamady Town*.

Ian was also given a recording of *The Mandé Variations*, Toumani's long-awaited sequel to his first solo album (made thirty years after *Kaira*) as well as a copy of *In the Heart of the Moon*, Toumani's 2005 Grammy-winning duet with the legendary Malian desert blues player Ali Farka Touré. From these Ian chose *Mamadou Boutiquier* (Mamadou the Shopkeeper) and *Kaira* to make his arrangements, first taking this traditional music, which is never written down, and getting the notes on a page: "I had to write it down in order to understand it, to try to understand how it is put together. The important thing was to write music that worked for the orchestra, but with something absent, so that the Malian musicians could speak over the top," he explained.

Ian used Toumani's recordings as the basic structure for what he wrote for the orchestra, but he would soon learn that a plan is only a plan, and once you have a few griots on stage, where the music flows like water and every performance is different, you have an entirely new set of problems when trying to drive a machine as large as a symphony orchestra. "We could use the recording as the structure, but in rehearsal we had to move things around," remembers Ian. Once Toumani's *griot* ensemble gave full rein to their powers of improvisation and creative interpretation, the original piece had to adapt, the entire orchestra had to adapt and change in the moment.

Speaking from his current residence in Abidjan, *Cote d'Ivoire*, Toumani reminds us that "the music of the *jeli* is never the same, the bass is there, but everyone has different dreams, so

everybody plays the pieces differently, from person to person and moment to moment, even though we have some things in common together, everyone has their own intelligence...this difference is what the world needs today, to show people the difference, to understand the exchange between people in African music."

These differences between performances would find fertile ground once the LSO entered the picture to perform this beautiful collaboration which Toumani considers as a continuation of his work with Ali Farka Touré: "This is another *In the Heart of the Moon*, but in a classical way...if you listen to *Cantelowes*, that's the accompaniment of Ali...it is now even more sophisticated, with orchestra, to show to the audiences: 'look at this music in a new way, look at African music in a new way.'"

The Barbican added another arranger, Nico Muhly, who at the time was working as Philip Glass's assistant. Nico gave himself a slightly different task when he found himself working on this project. He had already been familiar with Toumani's music, growing up in a house where African music was frequently heard. Nico wanted the orchestra to retain what he calls "the aquatic nature of the music". He wanted, by sleight of hand, to create an orchestral score that would almost not exist, a score which would support the music but in no way define what Toumani was doing when he eventually sat in with the orchestra. "I had a very clear image from the start of what I didn't want to do, to avoid the awkwardness of the pairing of non-western instruments with the orchestra...I wanted to keep the orchestra in a different 'room' to Toumani, to create a subtle architecture that would allow the music to simply happen, to leave space for embellishment, to be merely a few subtle cues that Toumani could react to in his improvisations," said Nico, speaking from his Manhattan studio.

Once the arrangements were completed, the work of communication between two different musical traditions really began. Toumani made many of his own adjustments, changing where the beats were heard, shifting sections around, shortening some parts and, most importantly of all, creating space for improvisation – his task to make sure the orchestra translated this music not as they would conventionally hear and play it, but as a *griot* from a completely different musical tradition would hear it. The music could never sit still on the page, it lived in the moment and in the musician's fingertips. Somehow this indeterminacy had to be combined with the original writing and it was here that Clark's ability to leave the classical world, an ability learned in his extensive work with such jazz luminaries as Brad Meldau and Wayne Shorter, came to the fore: "The greatest joy of my life is to get orchestras dancing with the music of the greatest artists of our time, and for the whole thing to be a joyous occasion." And of course in doing this - bringing the orchestra into contact with musicians who are always on the edge of the text, touching texts, changing texts, altering them at every turn, or even completely ignoring them - Clark simultaneously brought classical music back to its own spiritual centre, the spontaneous improvisations and cadenzas of its own greatest masters, from a time before the music was codified and the performance traditions fixed.

Ian's impeccable score would allow the orchestra to celebrate the full richness of a bygone age of orchestral writing, evoking the pastoral lushness of a symphony in full melodic flight, especially in the heart-stopping composition *Hainamady Town*. The piece starts with a searching improvisation on solo *kora*, touching the harmonies of the main theme, playfully and gently suggesting what will come. Here Toumani demonstrates the art of introduction known as

"questioning" among *Mandé* griots: "This is when a musician plays a series of free rhythm, formulaic lines, where the musician gets his creative juices flowing in order to move into the specific piece, much as an Indian classical musician begins with an alap," says Lucy Durán. And as the orchestra wakes, strings emerging in the lower register, double basses growing out of the depths of the slowly emerging textures, woodwinds coming as if from nowhere to play a counterpoint with the achingly beautiful solo kora played with the touch that only Toumani can achieve, the rhythm slowly becomes more pronounced as pizzicato strings suggest a gentle, complimenting rhythm, never taking over from the kora which seems to have left the earth's gravity and achieved a kind of dreamlike flight. And then we realise that Toumani's dreams are here for us to hear, and the orchestra's dreaming, while different, can merge as this new world is created in real time right before our eyes.

Nico's orchestration in *Cantelows (Jarabi)* and *Mama Souraka* (formerly *Djourou Kara Nany*, a piece frequently performed by Toumani's father) is far more sparse even though there are moments where members of the orchestra emerge and take centre stage, like the oboe which solos above the range of the kora in *Mama Souraka*, followed by flutes and then shimmering arpeggios in the strings, riffing on the never-changing two chord bassline which provides the ground for everything to happen on top, a perfect marriage of the constant and the indeterminate, the rooted and the free. Nico compares the work of an arranger with a clothing designer: "If you have done your job right, the light shines on the wearer." And this is what his arrangements certainly achieve: a heightened sense of what happens in Toumani's band, with the balafon solos and guitar solos emerging with a very new sense of gravitas, the orchestra never doing more than suggesting what it can do, reminding us of textures that are at once familiar but are now heard supporting a more informal kind of virtuosity, like the informal meetings of musicians on a hot Bamako night, or the rowdy gatherings of musicians at an eighteenth-century German coffee house.

It is in Nico's arrangements that we hear *The Symmetric Orchestra*, Toumani's band of musicians from Mali's most celebrated musical families, for the first time. The band includes Fanta Mady Kouyaté, a guitarist from the revered family who are the custodians of the sacred *balafon* (xylophone) that belonged to the *griot* of Sunjata Keita (founder of the Mali empire in 1235); *balafon* player Lassana Diabaté, originally from Guinea, the most versatile virtuoso of *balafonists*; and Kasse Mady Diabaté, the late great singer from Kela, from an illustrious *griot* family who specialises in the oral tradition of the story of Sunjata Keita's rise to power in the thirteenth century, as well as ngoni player Ganda Tounkara and Fode Kouyate on calabash and tama.

The contrasting arrangement styles create a wonderful variety in the orchestral textures, reminding us of the infinite possibilities Toumani says exist between different performances of the same piece in the *griot* tradition. This level of interpretation and textual freedom is sometimes lost in today's classical music, a once-celebrated freedom to interpret compositions that are more ephemeral than fixed, more memetic than canonical. To illustrate, Toumani suggests that the orchestral version of *Kaira* is yet another interpretation of the original, a piece with very strong family roots - a piece his father played countless times in "joyous resistance to colonial rule." He begins: "To hear that song being played by the LSO in the Barbican, having gone on the journey it has gone, ... its lineage and how it has arrived there, a western symphony orchestra playing this song of the resistance of our culture..." but trails off into

silence, perhaps imagining what his late father would have thought had he known that this piece would one day be performed in this way.

Derek Gripper, November 2020, Cape Town, South Africa.