

Fenba

For a long time I have struggled with two challenges: How can I present our culture to people who do not speak our language? And how can I play balafon music – normally composed for three musicians playing on one instrument – so that I can convey the same message?

For us of the Sambla culture in West Burkina Faso, the balafon is omnipresent. Each village, each important family, and every profession has its own piece of music that functions like a coat of arms. Music is composed for every important occasion, and any work carried out by the village community is accompanied by music. In reality, our music is a language. We learn it in early childhood alongside the spoken language. We can tell everything verbally expressible with the tunes of the balafon. Without opening the mouth we can tell our stories, report on current events, chat with the people around, mock people who annoy us, and even flirting. For the Sambla people, all this is self-evident. Others, however, perceive this music without these recognisable structures and after a while, they may get bored. Benevolent persons among them have attempted to teach me how to compose so that they too could enjoy my music. They couldn't understand that at home, with such a composition, I only would reap ridicule and consternation because nobody there would understand me.

Our music is normally played by three musicians. The highest-ranking balafonist plays (or rather tells) the solo in the high register. On his left side the second balafonist completes and comments on the solo and, at the same time, interacts with the third balafonist. On the opposite side of the balafon the third balafonist plays the basic rhythmic pattern to give orientation to the free flying soloist, and to the dancers and workers. Due to the interaction of the three musicians, there arise several, clearly audible melodic-rhythmic patterns, which are not played by any single musician. Using modern studio technology I was able to play this music in full splendour on my CDs 'Keneya' and 'Sababu' but I can't yet play it live. I have only two hands, each with one single mallet.

In order to solve this problem I had to revise almost everything about the balafon that I learned in childhood. This meant reworking the compositions to convey the impression that two or even three balafonists were playing. The decisive impulse to attempt this came from observing the Canadian pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin as he played Leopold Godowsky's Chopin-studies for the left hand. I was astonished how much was possible with the 5 fingers of one hand. I felt encouraged to experiment intensively, in order to find out what is possible with two mallets. Now I compress my music in a rhythmic-melodic line that is playable with two mallets, then I re-fragment it with accentuation to achieve the final effect.

This new playing technique also made the solution to the first problem possible. I now dramatise my stories, as in a radio play. This innovation has been well received at home by the Sambla, who are accustomed to receiving this music as a story. For those who do not hear the music this way, there is still the experience of a varied and highly polyphonic music.

With the traditional pieces on this CD I have set out to record a world that is going to be a thing of the past. In my own compositions, I cope with various topics and influences - joy, sadness, love, loneliness, longing or anger - that I encounter in everyday life. Thus the balafon is the mirror of my soul.

1. Fenba

This is my song of praise for all those who have supported me in constructing a new primary school in Burkina Faso. Fenba! As we say in my language – “They have done great things.” The school starts operations in September 2010. See : <http://sababu.mamadoudiabate.com>.

2. Biworo fani

In Africa, tasks are shared between men and women. Simplistically, one can say that men earn money and women do all the work occurring at home. Further, men are expected to provide support for the home and their wife. But if a woman's festive dress costs very little, everyone knows that her husband is not meeting his obligation. With this song I want to warn the men that the world is changing; women now earn money and are no longer so willing to accept disadvantages. They might seek another man instead.

3. Jine wele

This is one of the oldest and most important pieces of the Sambla tradition. This music is played in public rituals to call the guardian spirits if somebody, or the whole community, is in need. The priest carries out the necessary

rituals and explains the problem to the spirit. The spirit gives his answer or advice through the medium in trance. The full version of this song (JiTeso) is on my CD 'Keneya'.

4. Donso don

In traditional Africa the hunters are said to possess magic. Their musical instrument is called Donso-Ngoni (the hunter's harp). This piece, adapted for the balafon, belongs to these hunter-sorcerers.

5. Balanfolo

In Burkina Faso there is an amazing diversity of balafon cultures. This is my song of praise for the balafon and these balafonists - especially the Sambla, Tusia, Siamou and Jula.

6. Foni tomo

Fonio, one of the oldest African cereals, is our most important food. According to a legend, the entire universe resulted from the explosion of a single grain of fonio. Sowings, weeding, harvesting and threshing are therefore carried out with great ceremony. The original of this piece is played during the harvest in November. As they gather each bunch the farmers give thanks for the grains and apologise that they have to cut it off in order to feed their families.

7. Senekelaba

If a Tusia youth wants to get married he has to prove his strength at work. Young men used to challenge each other at their work to see who is the best. The balafon player watches the workers and tells the youths who don't work hard enough that they won't get their girls. In the evening the girls would check them with a fine linen cloth to see if they got dirty and sweaty enough during the day...

8. Kanu jugu

On my CD 'Sira Fila' Fatoumata Dembele sang about the power of love that lets the world shine in a new colour. Here is the "dark side of the power".

9. Duguyayiri

Faking consternation and dismay, busy like weasels with invented and distorted stories, the intriguers race around. Promising support and assistance they blacken others as a source of evil. After a while, the whole community is in an uproar. People accuse each other. Friendships get broken, old enmities are revived.

10. Koko wele

This music is played at a certain secret ritual. Around midnight, very carefully and quietly, so as not to wake other people or evil spirits, the oldest men sneak out into the bush to the ritual shrine of the powerful protective spirit Koko. What happens there is strictly confidential.

11. Dgo so

The balafon is my best friend. I can tell him things I would never tell anybody. It is also my personal lightning rod. I sit down to the balafon, start playing, and after a while, all anger (dgo in Sambla) is gone.

12. Fa te dogoya

As a small child you see your father as big, powerful, all knowing, as an all-rounder. Becoming an adult sometimes you wonder, how this small, frail and dithering old man can be your father. But isn't it a success of the fathers, that their sons surpass them?