



Malian virtuoso Toumani Diabaté came to the attention of the world with his debut solo *kora* (21-string harp) recording released in 1988. Named "Kaira" (the Arabic word for peace) after a composition from the repertoire of his father Sidiki Diabaté, the recording laid the groundwork for a new form of solo *kora* composition, one which has been closely studied by a younger generation of *kora* players. Taking the melodic phrasing of his mother Nene Koita, and the strident improvisational language of his father, Toumani created a form of two and three voiced counterpoint on a single *kora*, creating a music which liberated the *kora* from its usual role as an accompaniment to the voice. The five pieces from *Kaira* are traditional pieces from the twentieth century *kora* repertoire. They have been expertly and creatively re-composed by Diabaté, creating a wealth of melodic material throughout each composition. Diabaté's fertility of invention, strongly rooted in traditional forms, brings to mind the relationship between Bach's *Ciaccona* and the Spanish dance on which it is based.

The works by Sekou Batourou Kouyaté, a self-taught Malian *kora* player recorded in the 1970's, and Amadu Bansang Jobarteh, Toumani Diabaté's uncle who lived in the Gambia, demonstrate the *kora* language which influenced the young Diabaté. They also demonstrate a stately and older style of *kora* playing with its own unique magic.

Diabaté's later work, *The Mandé Variations*, condenses the explosive language of *Kaira* into a more meditative and free-flowing approach, probably influenced by the many collaborative projects recorded in the twenty year gap between the two albums, collaborations which focused on single line melodic improvisation rather than the dense counterpoint of *Kaira*. Also evident is Diabaté's re-composing of traditional compositions, most notably the beautiful ballad *Elyne Road*.

Ballaké Sissoko grew up down the road from Diabaté and comes from a similarly illustrious *griot* and *kora* lineage. His very personal style of playing is evocative and rooted in the old *kora* traditions. His duet performance with French cellist Vincent Segal saw him re-imagining the *griot* staple *Soundiata* as the beautiful *Chamber Music*. This composition has, over time, become intertwined in my own composition *Joni*, a rumination on the lines by Joni Mitchel: "they paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

The legendary guitarist Ali Farka Touré is a Malian musician from outside of the *griot* caste, a musician who drew on the richly diverse musical and linguistic traditions of Mali to create a new form of guitar playing. The piece '56, first recorded during the 1980's, and later revisited in the Grammy award winning collaboration with Diabaté, is a fine example of Touré's unique musicianship and fabulous integration of original composition and tradition.

Brazilian guitarist and pianist Egberto Gismonti provides a link between Africa and the guitar itself, as well as between Africa and contemporary composition. Gismonti's music draws on jazz, avant garde composition, classical music, Brazilian music and African music. *Selva Amazonica* from 1979 demonstrates Gismonti's unique use of multi stringed guitars, expanding on the guitar language of Heitor Villa Lobos by infusing it with a host of influences from contemporary jazz, popular music and contemporary classical. Using an unconventional stringing creates many interesting possibilities and extensions of the techniques familiar to those who play Villa Lobos' music, techniques which I have attempted to replicate on the traditional six-string guitar. This has, I hope, enlarged the repertoire of the instrument to include these fabulous works by one of Brazil's most powerful composers. Gismonti's piano music presents a stark contrast to his guitar style. I have arranged works such as *Sete Anéis* and *Ano Zero* using techniques similar to the arrangements of Bach's solo violin music for solo guitar.



South African guitarist Derek Gripper released his ninth album, *One Night on Earth: Music from the Strings of Mali*, late in 2012. Recorded at an all-night session the album magically conjures anew a centuries-old ancient African musical heritage, interpreting kora compositions (21 string harp) on solo guitar, a feat which classical guitar legend John Williams said he thought was "absolutely impossible until I heard Derek Gripper do it." When Kora maestro Toumani Diabate heard these recordings he asked his producer Lucy Duran to confirm that she had actually seen one person play this music on just one guitar. He immediately invited Derek to collaborate with him in Mali.

The UK's top world music publication, *Songlines*, called *One Night on Earth* "a staggering achievement," and selected the recording as a Top of the World album in 2013. Derek's "guitar has found the Kora-playing spirit, he captures the magic bound up in the way it is played", says Williams, who invited Derek back a second time to collaborate in "The John Williams Series" at London's Globe Theatre in June 2015 where the two musicians performed duets based on Diabate's kora works.

A new record of kora compositions has just been completed, exploring kora duets on solo guitar. The Kronos Quartet have also premiered one of Derek's arrangements for string quartet, continuing Derek's work to bring "*African guitar into the classical mainstream.*" (*Evening Standard*)

"Five stars...Gripper has brilliantly transferred [the kora] repertoire onto a regular six string guitar. He sees [Toumani] Diabaté as the Segovia, or indeed John Williams, of the kora, championing it as a solo instrument. And Gripper brilliantly takes it back to the guitar. He's opening a whole new repertoire of classical guitar music...bringing African guitar into the classical mainstream." [Simon Broughton]

"Gripper has cracked it...his playing has a depthless beauty, which does full justice to the complexity of Toumani's compositions. To do so without any hint of the music being

dumbed down is a staggering achievement on solo guitar.” [Nigel Williamson, Songlines Magazine]

“More than a labour of love, Gripper has brought a new purity to the dream-like improvisatory nature of these compositions. My recording of the year, so far!” [Tim Panting, Classical Guitar Magazine]

“The result is astounding, not just for its technical brilliance, but its musicality. Gripper executes these pieces with the precision and attention to detail one might expect from a great classical musician...It’s hard to imagine a more impressive and passionate rendering of Malian music on classical guitar.” [Banning Eyre, Afropop Worldwide]

“A true synthesis and a great album.” [Ian Kearey, fRoots]

www.derekgripper.com

