

My Kora Ethnomusicological Journey: From Traditional to
Experimental Kora Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethnomusicological study of my kora practice. After setting a context for the research by identifying the autobiography of my musicianship thus far I set out the cultural contexts of the instrument: its origins, purpose, organology in relation to other harps and its relation to the music, rhythm and language of its culture. The study of the intricate connections of kora to oral traditions and storytelling requires an understanding of the songs and stories associated with the kora and their role in its development. Furthermore, in the assessment of some experiences from this journey I aim to document and analyse some of the key challenges and learning outcomes of my initial kora studies that led to my ordering a custom instrument with machine head tuners and engaging in further study at home and internationally in the space. Through consideration of the issues of identity and respectful practice within the space and in relation to the ideas of musical change and globalisation in the kora space as well as the practice of key related practitioners, I hope to consolidate my understanding of my place with regards to these issues. Through the creation of varied compositional works, I aim to explore several key areas of my practice: more traditionally styled respectful kora music, entirely experimental practice within the digital workspace and crucially, the incorporation of kora sonorities into my primary studio compositional repertoire – dance music. In order to develop my kora technique and skill in accompaniment I took part in the World Music Ensemble and the Contemporary Music Group at Salford University, which led to performances with each group and accompanying music in a wide range of styles with the kora. Furthermore, I set out to create additional compositional works through the creation of delicate duet pieces with the lute and the reverse action piano harp in order to explore the kora's accompaniment potential in less complex situations that require different authoritative roles to those of larger ensembles. After evaluating the compositional outcomes and experiences of these practical elements, I outline my findings and explore the future of my kora-related study.

Digital Table of Contents

Compositions

File path: FNP / Compositions / Keke.wav

File path: FNP / Compositions / 'Night is Day, Day is Night'.wav

File path: FNP / Compositions / Fusion.wav

Duets

File path: FNP / Duets / Lute / Recercar.wav

File path: FNP / Duets / Harp / Harp Dream.wav

Paper

File path: FNP / Paper / From Traditional to Experimental Kora Practice

Additional Material

File path: FNP / Contemporary Music Group / Four Dirges.wav

File path: FNP / Contemporary Music Group / Performance / ACMG Band Room Performance
Video

File path: FNP / World Music Ensemble / Performance / Atmosphere Bar Performance Video

CHAPTER 1

Introduction – Autobiography

My first forays into music as a child involved piano lessons and some basic music theory. At the age of ten I began guitar lessons on a simple beginner's Squier electric guitar. Over the following ten years my guitar repertoire expanded to include acoustic and bass guitar and finally 8 string electric guitars. When my interest in electronic music arose at the age of 15 thanks to the genre fusions of bands like Linkin Park, Limp Bizkit and Enter Shikari I experimented with accompanying synthesisers with my guitars and making rudimentary mixes of my compositions in digital audio workstations. I now have an approach to music composition that can be best described as studio composition, making a variety of electronic and acoustic music that sometimes presents itself as a combination of the two. Using digital audio processing techniques, sampling, field recording, and synthesis my compositions are normally beat-based and directed towards dancing audiences. The guitar repertoire that I had cultivated for many years began to fade into the background of my compositional practice as it was found to be less easily applicable to underground dance music that was mostly made 'in the box' of the digital audio workstation. This process, once noticed, triggered a resistance within me as I had found playing physical instruments so rewarding in the past and I endeavoured to approach that aspect of my practice once again.

This occurred in an unlikely fashion when I discovered the kora as it was played in Piccadilly Gardens in Manchester. The kora's sound was somewhat familiar, yet quite different to anything that I had heard before. It inspired feeling and a sense of movement. The instrument's unusual appearance also appealed to me as it was an impressive



Figure 1.1 - John Haycock busking with his kora in Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester

spectacle to watch it played. My kora journey began when I became enthralled watching and listening to Jali Kuyateh, a griot from traditional lineage and master kora player from Gambia and his student John Haycock busking in Manchester City Centre and approached John asking if he would like some recording done as part of an undergraduate university project that I was undertaking at the time.

When carrying out my postgraduate studies here at Salford University, I chose the ‘Ethnomusicology’ optional module since I was very interested in the musical traditions and instruments of other cultures. My unexpected journey as an ethnomusicologist of West African music and the kora in particular began during my study of the instrument on this module. I began to fall in love with the playing interface and the culture itself and found that I had engaged at a high level with kora repertoire, practitioners and culture. This took the form of lessons and meetings with John and Jali, Holly Marland and trips to Toulouse spending weeks with the Kora Workshop, a kora making and country roaming organisation specialising in kora tuition and construction. My extensive studies on my university project, including my initial enculturation week with the Kora Workshop, led to a genuinely personal and quantifiable connection with the instrument, its music and its culture. The acquisition of knowledge about the importance of the kora in West African musical culture, the relationship to dancing and the related significance of West African rhythmic ideology on Western popular dance music bridged the initial gap between my studio compositional practice and that of the kora. My view became that if I could feel dancing rhythm through playing the kora, it would aid in my studio compositional process.

My intentions were to broaden my musical horizons and integrate the kora into my studio compositional practice in some form. The steady rhythm of the *kumbengo*



1.2 - Jali Kuyateh with his kora at his workshop during my interview

rhythms that accompany the quite playful, complex improvised *birimintingo* lines above them create a sonority that is pleasingly repetitive and kept interesting by the improvisational aspect to the playing on the higher notes. The nature of traditional kora songs utilising the instrument in this manner create a self-supporting and independent soundscape that I feel was part of the allure for me initially. A kora player can create enough musical energy and complexity to make it an unusually interesting solo instrument. There were some similarities between the improvisational, demonstration and imitation method of working with the kora and my studio compositional practice in terms of creating material and learning techniques. My studio compositions usually develop in an improvisational fashion with editing intervals that help to home in on the best or most effective musical parts that arise. Similarly, when playing the kora, the songs develop from simple steady rhythms to more complex melodic runs as improvisational parts begin to form into a more cohesive shape. Conflicts began, however, between the conformity of my kora practice in terms of the structured tutelage I had received and the desire to explore creativity in incorporating the kora into my studio compositions. My tendency was to play the kora in the style of my tutors and to use this instrument, not so much as a tool for use in broader, more ambitious studio compositions but at the centre of pieces. Each riff would take a traditional form with its rhythmic *kumbengo* and improvisational *birimintingo* lines creating a self-supporting style and independency. The challenge was to integrate and develop these techniques and enhance the creative potential of my kora practice in studio compositional and collaborative contexts. My experimental practice and involvement in the world music and contemporary music ensembles enabled the discovery of new creative angles from which to explore my kora repertoire and incorporate new techniques into my studio compositional repertoire.

While my tuition and research has developed a deep-rooted respect for kora tradition, in this paper I explore how my compositional approach can use the kora in creative and interesting ways. However, it may never be entirely divorced from its origins as a result of the structured tutelage that I have received. I propose an Ethnomusicological study of the kora in addition to my journey and experiences learning to play and compose with this instrument. This study will involve an extensive study element and three-pronged Melville Herskovits combined approach (Mead, 1963) of:

- Directed learning in the form of regular kora lessons with Adam Doughty from the Kora Workshop. This involves learning techniques, traditional songs on the kora and maintenance considerations such as changing strings and instrument care.
- Acculturation - Conscious learning in freestyle practice, directed kora lessons and an ongoing effort to incorporate the kora into my compositional practice through the creation and submission of varied compositional works. This will also involve research and an attempt to understand and to convey the culture and tradition behind this instrument. This research will attempt to understand the place of the kora in the world today and the effect of globalisation on the emergence of the kora onto the world music scene and its versatility as an instrument used for accompaniment.
- Enculturation – in the form of two enculturation weeks with the Kora Workshop in Toulouse taking part in intensive lessons and indeed eating and socialising with fellow kora students and Workshop owners Kath Pickering and Adam Doughty who dedicate their lives to kora construction and practice.
- Documentation, analysis and evaluation of my experiences in addition to my compositional and learning outcomes.

After setting a context for the paper with an overview of my compositional practice as well as both the historical and current kora practice, I evidence, describe and analyse my experiences during my ethnomusicological studies. Further to this I evaluate their progress through writing about and assessing the outcomes and the difficulties encountered during my studies. Through producing a body of varied compositional work using the kora I aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the kora as a compositional tool and attempted to use the instrument in entirely new and different ways. I created beat-based music, incorporated digital signal processing techniques from my studio compositional practice and attempted to build upon the avant-garde compositional techniques established in my emergent Max MSP kora composition to create experimental compositions that are not beat-based or conventional in their compositional approach in order to create entirely new sonorities. Furthermore, my practice involved exploring the kora's accompaniment potential through collaborative projects with the World Music Ensemble and the experimental Contemporary Music Group. I also explored kora duets with both the lute and the reverse-action piano harp. I evaluated the compositional outcomes of three key pieces and both of the duets. I intended to become proficient at playing this instrument

separated from my practice. However, I also intended to incorporate the kora into my compositional repertoire.

My journey as an ethnomusicologist can be described as a participant-observation form of scholarly research (Oxford University, n.d.) where my studies not only concern the study of culture and literature but a practical, musical study and engagement with the kora itself. This paper evaluates the significance of my experiences as a studio composer attempting to incorporate the kora into my compositional practice, as well as exploring the balance between kora tradition and creativity. I explore the potential connections between kora sonority, culture and West African community music through my research into these contexts. Andy Bennett in his book 'Music, Space and Place' explains the urban and rural spaces in which music is experienced, produced and consumed:

“The relationship between music, space and place demands an understanding of the ways in which the various component aspects of this relationship overlap and intertwine...the act of music – making becomes invested with a series of rich discourses concerning the impact of cultures on collective creativity... the actual sounds and timbres produced by musicians in given local settings are deemed to result from their sharing of particular forms of local knowledge and experience” - Andy Bennett (Whiteley, Bennett, & Hawkins, 2005)

My practice will not involve detailed learning of the traditional songs and languages involved, beyond the meaning of the kora pieces. I will avoid singing in those styles as I feel that it could be in danger of appropriating culture and not becoming proficient or confident enough to carry out respectful traditional vocal work in addition to showing competence in playing the instrument. In making this distinction I seek to respect the kora tradition and reinforce my identity as an experimental studio composer fascinated with the instrument and its culture, exploring how I can integrate the kora into my studio compositional repertoire while respecting traditional practice and its origins. In doing so I attempt to achieve a balance, allowing for experimental practice and the creation of interesting and novel compositional outcomes, while respecting the cultural spaces of the tutelage that I have received along this journey.

CHAPTER 2

The Kora Interface

A kora is a bridge-harp instrument originating from West Africa griot/jali culture (Hale, 2007). It is made out of a hollowed-out gourd called a calabash, through which an African hardwood neck runs. This gives support to a floating hardwood bridge with notches that normally hold between 21 and 24 strings arranged in two rows and that are tuned in an alternating fashion (Duran, 2011). These strings are plucked by the player's thumbs and first fingers on each side. The player's thumbs normally play the *kumbengo* patterns of notes that can be considered the bass rhythm and melody of a piece, over which *birimintingo* improvised melodies or runs are played by the player's first fingers. This could be described as a polyrhythmic style of harp playing. Below the bridge the strings are knotted to anchor strings with a weaver's knot and the anchors in turn are looped around an iron or steel ring in the tailpiece. Cow or deer hide forming the sound-table also extends partway over the gourd, which is studded with decorative chrome tacks. A sound-hole is bored through the body to enable amplification of the body resonance. Optimal resonance is achieved when the tailpiece rests on the floor, sometimes supported by a specially-made stand (Ridenour, 2010). There are two primary methods of plucking a string: open and muted. The pitches of the strings ascend in thirds across both sides of the bridge, enabling two to four note chords, rapid scalar passages using alternating fingers or thumbs and octave doubling (Charry, 2000).

Traditional koras are tuned using intertwined leather strips called *konso* around which a string is wound and then tied, resting in the bridge's notches, to the weaver's knots attached to the anchor at the base of the instrument. Many modern practitioners,



2.1 - A kora with 'konso' tuning rings and nylon strings

however, make use of machine heads tuner adaptations that allow for easier tuning and string maintenance. The instrument that I ordered was primarily inspired by my need for such an adaptation. I had fallen in love with the sound and the culture of this instrument as I began my ethnomusicological journey with the kora, but it seemed that there must surely be a better way to interact with the tuning of this instrument. My first encounter with a kora that had machine head tuners was when I had interviewed Holly Marland, a pioneering female kora player at MediaCity in Salford following her BBC Radio show performance. My musical background as a guitar player found a far greater familiarity and ease in the machine head tuners running the neck of her kora.

More extensive encounters with these machine head koras occurred during my stay with Adam Doughty and Kath Pickering of 'The Kora Workshop', based in England, France and Senegal at different times of year. Almost all of their koras used machine head tuners and during my week of enculturation I not only played these instruments extensively but witnessed and made a documentary of the construction of his koras from the very beginning to the finished product as part of my study of kora organology which resulted in a 'Making a kora with Adam' documentary. A kora had to be slightly modified from Siliba, which translates roughly as F Major, and tuned to the less common tuning from the home region of Jali Kuyateh that I had learned with, roughly based on G Dorian, in order to enable my supplementary practice for my lessons with John and my upcoming project recital and presentation. My time in St Igest, near Toulouse, was spent learning some techniques and



2. 2 – A photograph of myself playing a machine head kora with the Kora Workshop in St-Igest, Toulouse in 2017

traditional songs, as well as immersing myself in kora culture and trying to learn as much as possible about the instrument as well as the kora practitioners involved in its rise onto the world music scene. These experiences are documented in the form of video documentaries and diaries in the appendix.

There was some difficulty adjusting to the new tuning; these koras felt quite different to my own and I was unable to work out how to play any of the songs I had learnt with John in the G Dorian tuning. This led to some frustration and triggered a thought process regarding what tuning I would go ahead to use, and it seemed, at the time, that actually F Major could prove to be more versatile in incorporating this instrument into my studio compositional practice. I then found out that my teacher John Haycock was going away to France for an indeterminate amount of time to busk and play at various events. The idea of losing my guidance and help in my attempt to play and to understand this instrument to incorporate it into my studio composition repertoire worried me greatly and it became apparent that I would need a new teacher.

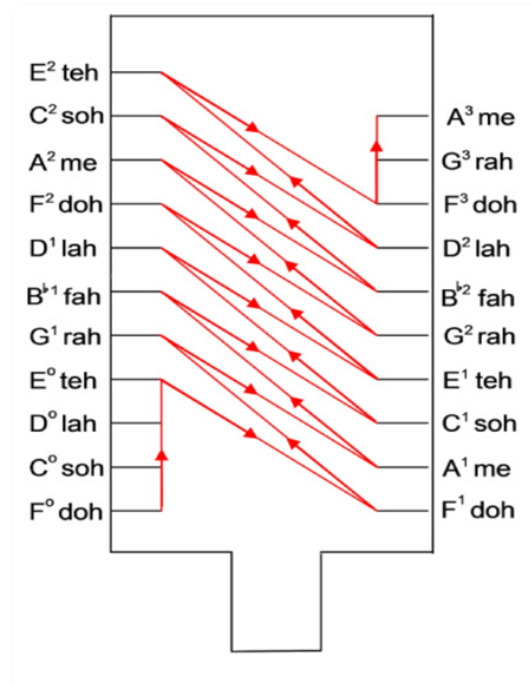


2. 3 - My ordered and completed instrument - a 22 string bubinga kora with bass and guitar machine head tuners and Piezo pickups

These experiences eventually led me to desire a more versatile kora that would make accompaniment with other instrumentation and the possibilities of incorporating it into my studio compositional practice much less problematic. This would take the form of a larger instrument with machine head pegs and more effective pickups that would enable amplification. My order for an instrument of my own from Adam Doughty was a 22-string kora made from a durable hardwood called *bubinga*, complete with machine head tuners, bass heads for the bottom 6 strings and better Piezo pickups for more accurate amplification. It is important to note that the

sound of the instrument is not really different at all from the more traditional *konso* instrument I owned previously, though both are different in their sound reproduction to a truly traditional kora due to the fairly recent implementation of nylon as string material, where before quieter, rougher sounding and more primitive leather strings were used.

My new instrument shares the hollowed calabash body, hardwood neck and nylon strings that the previous instrument was made of, but with a much more refined and less taxing interface for the tuning of the kora – machine head tuners. These tuners crucially led to flexibility of tuning in practice as the need to retune slightly for ensemble situations would arise and play a crucial part in my ability to accompany effectively and with greater freedom. This led to movements beyond the tuning in which it is traditionally strung, changing several strings efficiently with the machine heads to play in more keys. The instrument also contains Piezo pickups that allow for easy amplification of the sound allowing for my participation in large ensembles such as the World Music Ensemble and the Contemporary Music Group that I have taken part in as part of my practical research. The new instrument was also tuned in the most common and arguably most versatile kora tuning known as ‘Siliba’ - similar to F Major. This new instrument was not without difficulty, however, as it presented its own difficulties that I had not encountered before.



2. 4 - A diagram showing the string names, gauges and the alternating direction of pitch on a 21-string kora in 'Siliba' tuning. Taken from <https://www.thekoraworkshop.co.uk/kora-information/how-to-tune-your-kora/>

Comparative Organology

There are both similarities and differences between my original primary instrument, the guitar, and the instrument which I am attempting to learn which affect my ability to incorporate the kora into my studio compositions. The kora interface is in some ways similar to that of the guitar which I was accustomed to, but it is also different in terms of its sonorities and its expressive qualities. While I do own a nylon stringed, classical acoustic guitar, the sound that the kora



2. 5 - Western Concert Harp fitted with levers allowing for chromaticism in note range

makes with its nylon strings is quite different. It sounds smoother and more full-bodied thanks possibly to the large sound body and the gauges used. My finger plucking technique for guitar, while not necessarily ‘correct’ also involves plucking the strings with thumb and first finger. When playing the kora, the thumb and first finger of the left hand is also concerned with plucking a parallel set of strings, rather than interacting with a fretted neck to control the pitch of each string. While this has made it easier for me to pluck the strings, this dual-row system takes quite a bit of getting used to and is a crucial learning experience in of itself when one’s mind attempts to process the complementary mechanical functions of the hands on two planes

simultaneously. The kora’s expressive potential is perhaps

more limited than that of a guitar because of the inability to add vibrato to notes as on a fretted neck. The tonal range of the kora is more limited, due to the 22 different pitch possibilities available with one note for each open string, whereas a six-string guitar with 22 frets has 47 different pitches. On fretted instruments like the guitar, the same note is available on different places on the fingerboard with different qualities of sound.

It is also more difficult to play in different keys on the kora while playing and that are removed from the tuning in which it has been set. Due to this, rhythm and timing become much more important vehicles for changing mood when playing the kora. The kora is enhanced, however, in that it is able to play many notes in quick succession; up to eleven on each side. This bears resemblance to some Western harps such as lever-action and concert harps utilising pedals with large numbers of open strings that can be strummed in quick succession and across the range of notes more easily, whereas a guitar is limited to six – one for each string at best without changing the pitch of a note using the fretboard and so muting the note before it. These harps however often have an interface element, in the form of levers that allow for the transposition of open-strings, giving them greater tonal range and more flexibility in accompaniment. An interesting fusion in terms of harp interface is that of an action harp that utilizes a keyboard not

dissimilar in appearance or function to a piano's keys that allow the player to transpose individual or groups of strings giving them greater versatility in chromaticism and thus ease of accompaniment. In contrast to these instruments, the kora's organological developments have focused on tuning interface and amplification rather than chromaticism and so it has remained diatonic.

The invention and patenting of the reverse-action piano harp and criticism of musical interfaces (Brissenden P. G., 2015) by Phil Brissenden at the University of Salford is such an example (Brissenden P. , 2016). It is an action harp with 42 strings strummed with a thumb plectrum, nails, fingers and a keyboard interface that the player can use to create chords and which aid in musical accompaniment due to the chromaticism that they enable. The reverse action variant allows key-based damping of notes on the autoharp, distinguishing it from other action harps. It is notably different from the kora in that the playing method of this particular harp is somewhat in reverse - strings are very close together and the instrument is invariably strummed rather than plucked. The idea that instruments like the kora are subject to change over time as with its machine head tuners and electrification, seems particularly driven by the desire to accompany other varied instrumentation in a variety of musical styles. This reverse action piano harp, now in its fifth prototype, is still developing and changing to become more versatile and easier to use.

Further developments include an additional three strings in the lower bass register to create a fully chromatic bass register and the possibility of extra keys on its keyboard interface. The kora, while limited largely to the key in which it is strung albeit with some modal compatibility, is similar in interface-related intention, in that there are commonly octaves available to the player. These form a crucial part of traditional songs which commonly use octave doubling which can add body to melodies when appropriate, or even used more unpredictably in an improvisational fashion. The cross-strung harps commonly adopted by Welsh harpists share



2. 6 - Phil Brissenden pictured with his reverse-action piano harp invention

the characteristics of opposing sets of nylon strings, that a player interacts with across multiple planes as on the kora (Riley, 2017).

The sets of strings on a cross-strung double harp can be altered with two full sets of sharpening levers and this enables the chromaticism that enables easier accompaniment with chromatic instrumentation. The triple harp's development enabled greater access to accidentals through the third set of strings which enabled chromaticism in its note range. On double and triple strung harps, like the kora, having two sets of strings reduces conflicts of space between hands and so frees hand movement, sharing this same multiplane of playing technique that allows for the creation of more complex melody and harmony when compared to single strung harps despite being of the same overall size. The sets of strings are also tuned identically to one another on double and triple strung harps, allowing for interesting 'waterfall'

effects when played interchangeably and juxtaposed utilising the double melody techniques, but differing in style and function from the kora's alternating string sets where no two strings are tuned to the same pitch across the instrument and a key playing technique is using opposing thumbs and first fingers to do melodic runs up and down the neck in a largely alternating fashion (Riley, 2017).

Furthermore, the kora is arguably an exceptionally ergonomic instrument (compared to much



2. 7 - A double-strung harp fitted with two sets of parallel strings as on the kora

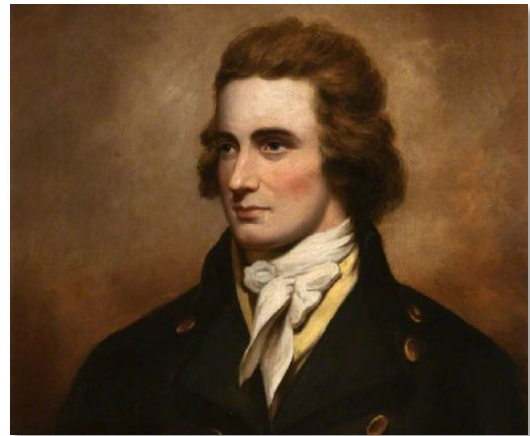


2. 8 - A picture taken from an early kora lesson with John Haycock showing the player's orientation to the instrument and the purpose of the handles that pierce the body of the calabash

heavier floor or lap-supported harps) that one can play in a variety of positions – sitting, lying down or standing up thanks to the hardwood handles piercing the calabash body with which one holds the instrument providing a steady foundation from which to play the instrument.

Cultural History

Jelia culture is linked to the time of Sunjana Keita's reign, who was a 12th century Mali emperor (David C Conrad, 1995). Jelia is a word that describes the practice of a jeli (The Kora Workshop, n.d.). Most jelia recognize the kora as a Mandinka instrument. The Mandinka were the westernmost branch of the 'Mande' people that became Mali. The kora was described in Western ethnomusicological records by Scots explorer Mungo Park, who discovered a large harp called a 'korro' among the Mandinka people that he lived with while charting the course of the Niger



2. 9 - A painting of Mungo Park who noted a large harp called a 'korro' while charting the course of the Niger river in 1797

River in 1797 (Ridenour, 2010). Early kora drawings were published separately by researchers Lang, Gray and Dochard who travelled in North East Sierra Leone and up the Gambia River in the early 19th century. The kora is closely linked to traditional 'griot' instruments. A 'griot' was a handler of 'nyoma', which is traditional occult power. This is also known as the power of praise (David C Conrad, 1995), and so as griots were seen as in possession of this power they were considered to be powerful individuals (Hale, 2007). Griots can be described as hereditary musicians, historians and genealogists and they are deeply rooted in oral traditions and storytelling (Duran, 2011). Griots are known by different names; 'jali' in the Gambia, or 'jeli' if from Mali (The Kora Workshop, n.d.). Lucy Duran describes these individuals as 'the hereditary professional musicians' castes of the Mande peoples of West Africa' and comments that: 'still today it is very rare to find a kora player who is not a jali (Duran, 2011). One hypothesis on the Arabic origins of the kora comes from a griot from the Dournmaga clan from Biankouma (Ivory Coast). The story states that all griots are the descendants of a man named Sourakata, who was given a kora by the Prophet Muhammed, after he had given all the weapons to the soldiers and instructed him to sing – so the role of the jali began. Charry states that the subject of instruments like the kora remained elusive and even secretive in nature in his research (Charry, 2000).

One alternative oral tradition of the origins of the kora says that there was a central figure called Jali Madi Wuleng. During the Kabu Empire era, which began in the 16th century, he is believed to have first discovered the kora with the aid of a ‘jinn’ found playing ‘beautiful music’ on the kora. Jinns are nighttime spirits which form an important part of African culture. He agreed to join the spirit world and marry the jinn’s daughter in return for his tuition on the kora, but he is said to have escaped and brought the kora with him to the Mandinka people. Some jelis believe that he composed one of the first songs called ‘Kuruntu Kelefa’ as a jeli for a famous warrior Kelefa Sane. ‘Kelefa Ba’ or ‘Great Kelefa’ – a song celebrating the life and composed after his death is even now a very significant song



2. 10 - A griot - troubadour/historian playing a pierced-body calabash harp (soron) with 'konso' tuning rings

and one of the key beginner’s tunes on the kora (Charry, 2000). Roderic Knight of the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music speculates that realistically, when one evaluates the evidence, the kora was likely created when a few strings were placed onto an existing Mande harp instrument (Knight, 2018). There were several such instruments with three to eight strings known as the ‘soron’ – also pierced body harps like the kora, which are unique to West Africa. On the ‘soron’ the curved neck spiked the body as on the kora and a string carrier stands upright on the sound-table to hold the strings. Straightening the neck and passing the strings over the holder, often in notches and making a bridge, enabled the instrument to accommodate the tension of more strings.

Issues of Language and Meaning

The importance of music in African cultures could be easily understated and has notable implications and connections to the language and songs beyond the storytelling of jalia kora culture. In the Nguni language of the Bantu peoples there is no word for music. There is however, ‘ngoma’, a performance dimension that includes music, dance and storytelling

(Zanzibar, n.d.). Music in Sub-Saharan cultures is essentially everything produced by humans that is rhythmic, moving or dynamic. The understanding of the importance of rhythm in West African music is reinforced by this lack of definition. The similarity to jalia culture is

uncompromisingly clear in

this regard and this lack of definition of what music is, is in my view, freeing and more human than sonically defined or even mathematically constructed definitions of music. Indeed, under this view language itself could perhaps be considered a form of music. It is produced by humans, rhythmic and indeed all languages use musical tone to imply meaning in some form and to some extent.

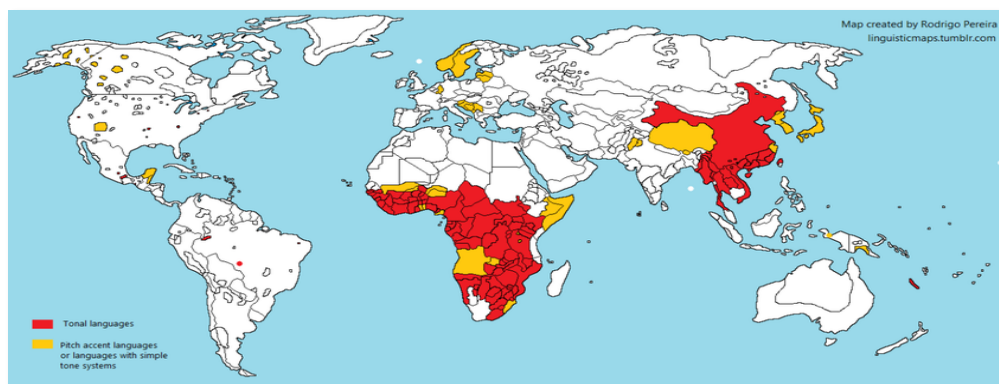


2. 11 - Elgon Ngoma Troupe - Kadodi Imbalu Dance: a type of ritualistic dance

In English and in many Western languages, for example, there are crucial tonal subtleties (called suprasegmentals) that we don't often think about, but that are crucial in conveying accurate meaning or intention (Crystal, 2010). We finish questions with a surprisingly consistent rise in pitch to denote the question mark. It would sound very strange or even humorous if one just rose or even dropped drastically or unusually in pitch in an attempt to denote a question. That would probably cause a mixture of confusion and humour to the audience and recipient of the question. If one is excited about something, one rises in pitch across the sentence but then rests slightly lower towards the end, distinguishing this common technique from a question and denoting a sort of audible exclamation mark and enthusiasm to what is being said. These prosodic features are a crucial part of communicating human feeling in what we say and, as the examples above demonstrate, are actually quite crucial to the meaning that is conveyed and to the intended response or visual mannerism-based feedback of the words. The difference in interest one has for a dynamically tonal individual speaking compared to a completely monotone speaker is almost a universal rule in of itself. The connection of human communication and language with musical

tonality is arguably fundamental in this regard. The use of tonal phonemes to denote feelings such as excitement is certain to have been a prelingual phenomenon, where words may well have first developed from prosodic features of communication.

The importance of tonal patterns in language is clear. There are West African languages such as Igbo, Efik, Yoruba and Maninka in which the importance of tonal patterns is much more significant, where a different tone can completely change the meaning of individual words. These are called tonal languages which contain tone-dependent phonemes. Phonemes are the individual sound units of language which form the constituent parts of words. Igbo and Efiks' tritonal tonal aspects rely and interact more closely with the grammatical aspects of the language in that they have low and high tone levels which act independently as level tones, distinct tones made up of two phonemes, and a mid-tone that acts on a preceding high-tone which represents a transitory or sliding tone. These tend to evolve in tritonal languages and extremely rare languages with more than three distinct tones. The tonal complexities of others like Yoruba bear little relation to the grammar of the language (Green, 1919). The ethnomusicological study of vocal techniques and stylism in music has been extensive, carried out by ethnomusicologists such as Hugo Zemp's 'Ethnomusicology Collection' with extensive video catalogues and written articles which have been produced from many musical spaces around the musical world (Kanopy, n.d.). There is arguably as much variation in vocal technique and stylism as there is in organology. West Africa has one of the highest concentrations of tonal languages in the world as can be seen in Figure 2.10 below, suggesting that the kora space is a musical space particularly affected by the tonal languages spoken by its culture.



2. 12 World Map showing the location of tonal and pitch accent languages

Kora Music Language, Song and Space

Tonal languages clearly have a significant effect on the music of their culture in terms of the implications for how songs are constructed and sung, which in turn can guide any instrumental accompaniment. This effect, however, is hard to quantify and will vary from culture to culture. It could be helpful to first try to distinguish tonal language from vocal music and identify its commonality in communicative potential. Given the rarity of tritonal languages an interesting comparison can be found in that the most common musical scale contains seven distinct tones, and almost all contain many more than three (Patel, 2008). Particularly in the case of complex tonal language however, consistency of contextual intonation is key to identifying and understanding both musical and language-based gestures. Arguably rhythm is more irregular in language than in musical gesture, though comparable in complexity. There exists a conflict in perceptions between rhythm and absolute rhythm in analyzing language and music because it is difficult to argue whether either is entirely distinct with respect to these definitions. Indeed, it might be claimed that: “Rhythm is hierarchical in nature in language, as it is in music” (Nespor, Shukla, & Mehler, 2007).

Perhaps a syllabic tonal language is most similar to musical vocalisation because syllables mark off roughly equal temporal intervals (Pike, 1945). This shares parallels with note values in music. Communicative rhythmic gestures can even become codified sound with distinct tonal drumming that conveys specific meanings, as in Morse code. The behaviours themselves of making language-based or musical gestures are interpreted overtly differently by human beings as we seem to recognise the distinction perhaps due to behavioural norms and our common humanity. However, the phenomenon of language and language-based communication can certainly exist independently of sound; sign language provides a fundamental distinction in that its communication exists without any audible gesture or sound.

The connections of these rhythmic and tonal language characteristics to African perceptions of music as ‘ngoma’ and as anything rhythmic produced by humans, would suggest that the effect of tonal language on kora music is actually substantial, despite language and music appearing distinct in their individual identity. The importance of dancing rhythm in West African music, and indeed in the kora space, with its deep connection to varied vocal stylism is significant in that their marriage created a symbiotic relationship between kora music and the varied vocal

elements of songs and storytelling, each taking the foreground interchangeably and depending on the communicative significance of the part at that time. Furthermore, there could exist a relationship between tonal complexity created in tonal language and that of the musical scales used, as there are often additional tonal intonation steps, known as ‘maqams’, in the kora music to that of Western scales and indeed in the vocal elements that accompany it. There is a huge variation in the number of distinct tones within musical scales that differ regionally, and it is difficult to quantify this due to my cultural perspective within the western tempered scales and furthermore as a studio composer working in only a limited fashion with notated musical texts.

There is an interesting space for language and song within kora music and indeed vocals played an important part in jelia for the transmission of history, stories and the praise of individuals or concepts. The globalisation of kora music has, however, resulted in an increase in instrumental kora music without vocals as exemplified by a series of instrumental albums that saw Toumani Diabete develop the progress that his father Sadiki has made onto the world music stage, which famously lacked any vocals (Morgan, 2014). This is arguably because it presented a much more accessible format for Western audiences through retaining the harp-like string sound of the kora and leaving out the singing. This singing in Mande and other African languages is not only incomprehensible to many music listeners in places like Europe and America, but also quite unique in terms of the range of styles. The inability to understand what is being sung, and in some cases an indifference to the style of vocal accompaniment, perhaps reduces the extent to which kora music is accessible. Indeed in Ghana, a positively complimentary phrase ‘sing like a parrot’ seems to bring a quite different meaning to someone from a Western culture that generally associates parrots with loudness and squawking and so crucially missing the cultural associations at play here (The Kora Workshop, n.d.). Some of the songs are more like spoken-word poems of history, some are quite dynamic and loud styles of singing such as praise songs found commonly among African culture and some are placed somewhere in the middle.

An interesting example of this range of vocal stylism contained within one piece of kora music is that of the ‘Sadiki Jobarteh Diabete Ensemble – The Sunjata Epic’ (Torchy56revisited, 2013). This piece commemorates Sunjana Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire. Mali was one of the richest empires on the planet in the 14th Century due to its position on the trade routes that brought gold from its gold deposits, ivory and other precious African tradeable goods to the rest of the world (Cain, 2019). This piece demonstrates several different vocal styles from spoken

word poetry and storytelling with humble melodic accompaniment on the kora to loud and dynamic singing sections that are more complex melodically but convey words and meaning to an audience more simply. One could argue, however, that language is but a part of the range of vehicles that a singer uses to convey meaning. Another vehicle is that of vocal melody which can take place outside of conventional language and provide an interesting vocal accompaniment with basic fundamental lyrical meaning through tonal or musical complexity.

Oumou Sangare, a Grammy Award winning Malian Wassoulou (historical region south of the Niger River) musician, sings a song over kora music and accompanied by cello called 'Moussoulou' meaning 'women'. The song contains sparse lyrical content but a complex vocal melody line that is bold and catchy (Records, 2018). Traditional jelia often involved kora playing with spoken-word vocal accompaniment that took the form of storytelling more than 'song' where the jeli would convey something deemed to be important and meaningful.

This is an example of kora music existing in both tone-centric and lyric-centric spaces. The popularization of music including kora parts demonstrates the emergence of the kora as an increasingly mainstream instrument that

accompanies a wide range of vocal style. With the kora generally understood to be an Islamic instrument, practitioners often reference Allah in their lyrics and give thanks and praise to their deity. There are significant ethnomusicological bodies of research documenting styles of singing, like that associated with the kora, that are designed for certain social or ceremonial occasions. Hugo Zemp's Ethnomusicology Collection documents several such styles in the form of video documentaries, such as funeral chants in the Georgian Caucasus unusual in their male and female lamentations and male-driven polyphonic chants often dissonant in their harmony to express the grief of death (Kanopy, n.d.). The popular kora song 'Jarabi' (meaning 'beloved') was composed



2. 13 - Oumou Sangare - a Grammy Award winning Malian Wassoulou musician and writer of the song 'Moussoulou' meaning 'women'

by the Mende people in an attempt to capture the spirit of the renaissance following the separation of the Mali Federation but is commonly used as a ceremonial song for wedding ceremonies and celebrations to praise the beloved.



2. 14 - Screenshot taken from Hugo Zemp's documentary on Georgian funeral chants or "zier", which are sung by male choirs but use no words, just a series of syllables that follow a set pattern

Adaptive, space-dependent techniques exist within the language of kora music and traditional songs that aim to translate the words to assist audiences in different parts of Africa itself in understanding the meaning of the songs. Some songs were sung in older languages coming from or close to 'Bambara', one of the Mande languages. Kora players and griots change the lyrics into their own language and often the meaning, either deliberately or accidentally, changes slightly. One example of this is that of the story of 'Miniam ba' which translates to 'python', of which there are several similar versions told. The Mandinka story tells of a headstrong pregnant woman who goes into the bush and starts to give birth unexpectedly. A python nearby comes to help her to deliver the baby on the condition that she not tell anyone that he had helped and so ruin his reputation as a fearsome snake. Another story describes the python eating a village suffering drought and moving it closer to water, while another describes that the python simply ate everyone in the village. They all share common themes of respect towards the power of a python but differ significantly in the story told (The Kora Workshop, n.d.). The stories and songs are fluid and naturally change over time due to the nature of oral tradition and in the absence of a referenceable musical text. The songs are even often adapted, and griots would make up their own versions adding sections or lines supporting their patrons who support them financially and

their personal families as holding a special place in society and perpetuating the traditional hereditary power of a griot family name.

Kora music can also be used as a vehicle for socio-economic or political change through the meaning conveyed in the lyrics of songs. Pa Bobo Jobarteh, a kora virtuoso from a griot family lineage used his influence on his song 'New Gambia' (Home, 2016) to address the issue of Gambia's long-term president Jammeh, who refused to give up his power after an election took place (Ruth Maclean, 2018). New Gambia became a catchphrase among the political movement towards freedom and unity of the people in the Gambia and he became a wanted man because of the implications and popularity of his message. The movement was successful as Yahya Jammeh was exiled to Equatorial New Guinea (Ruth Maclean, 2018). Sona Jobarteh, a female pioneering virtuoso from a leading griot family lineage, writes songs about equality, African freedom and pride such as her song 'Gambia' in celebration of the Golden Jubilee of Independence for the Gambia in 2015. 'Kaira', a kora song from the 1900s written by Toumani Diabete's father Sidiki, was part of the 'negritude' movement towards rising consciousness and black pride. The movement aimed to promote African culture and history and was essentially an assertion of cultural identity through resistance to the colonial occupation and its educational indoctrination of French culture, history and achievement (Micklin, n.d.).



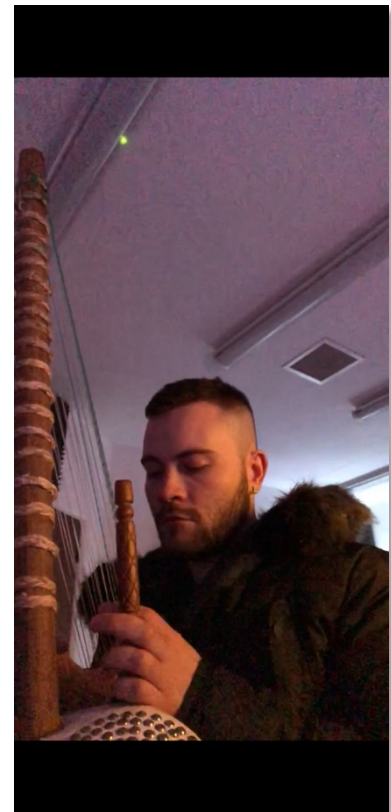
2. 15 - "La Jungla" - a famous negritude movement painting by Cuban born Afro-Chinese artist Wilfredo Lam

CHAPTER 3

Initial Encounters

It seems prudent to document some of the key experiences from my ethnomusicological journey of study with the kora. The beginning of this ethnomusicological study was through the observation of John Haycock and Jali Kuyateh busking in the city centre in the summer of 2015. The experience was memorable enough even as an informal listener interested in the kora, that given the option to study an instrument or style from another culture, I chose to get back in touch with John as part of the Ethnomusicology module on my Master's degree at Salford University in February 2017 and learn about the kora in a formal and dedicated manner. I bought an instrument that he had made, with a pickup for amplification and a *konso* tuning ring interface system with some braided strings and began learning in the form of weekly lessons between February and July 2017. During these lessons I learned to play traditional pieces such as 'Tuba Tuba' and 'Jarabi'. I learned a piece created by and unique to Jali Kuyateh himself and learned about the tuning interface and aspects of maintenance of the instrument. This process was quite difficult in terms of the kora interface as my fingers and thumbs struggled to adjust to playing two separate, parallel rows of strings harmoniously.

The learning methodology implemented here was similar to that of a traditional kora tutee, with a consistent process of imitation and repetition when learning parts. The tunes would be built upon demonstration and imitation of basic rhythmic *kumbengo* lines and then we would attempt to layer *birimintingo* melodies and octave doubling over and around this rhythmic base. The kora's open tuning is fairly forgiving of mistakes and quite an accessible interface for a beginner simply because of the drastically lower incidence of 'wrong' notes. It is quite possible for anyone to pick up a kora and by strumming or plucking to create a nice sound. It struck me early on that the goal was to achieve precise control in practice where one plays only the notes that one intended. Learning specific melody lines could be quite a frustrating



3. 1 - A photograph of myself learning with my first 'konso' tuning ring interface kora

process as one strikes the wrong note accidentally. It was often difficult to maintain a steady rhythm as I try to play harmoniously with my tutor but often attempt to correct mistakes as I go along and then fall behind the melody and my tutor.

Konso Kora

The tuning interface using the traditional *konso* tuning rings, made of intertwined strips of leather, was extremely difficult to move and maintain and thus was severely compromising in my practice previously. Moving the *konso* to tune strings involved gripping the instrument's body tightly between one's legs and holding it in place while using your thumb and first fingers of both hands to move the ring up or down the neck which put great strain on the fingers and joints. I would also find myself with bruising on my inner thigh, where the cross-pieces dug in during this laborious process. These rings also tended to slip, and I was surprised by the simple potency of the traditional use of sugar and water, made into a paste, to help stick these rings back into place. Further maintenance involved learning to use a sharp screwdriver to move the rings back into a more even spacing on the hardwood neck, by unwinding them slightly while taking great care not to break the *konso* in order to move the ring and adjust the tension in the opposite direction simultaneously.

This tuning and maintenance process, while interesting and quite fitting for an instrument made essentially with materials that were available in West



3. 2 - John Haycock using a screwdriver to adjust the ring spacing on my konso tuning ring kora in Spring 2017. To do this he eased the tension of the string around the ring to give more or less string length and thus enable greater or lower string tension at the new position



3. 3 - John Haycock demonstrating the string attached to the iron ring tailpiece as he changed a string that broke during the ring adjustment process

Africa at the time, unfortunately became such a nuisance that I found myself avoiding it and using lesson times as times where my teacher could retune the instrument for me rather than focusing on the key part of my practice – learning to play the instrument. When John Haycock left to tour France with his kora in the summer of 2017, I realised that I was not going to be competent enough with the *konso* tuning interface to facilitate regular practice with the instrument. Despite demonstrations by John Haycock during the learning process, I still found that I could not maintain my instrument, change strings or work with the *konso* rings. This eventually led to my ordering a custom machine head kora from the Kora Workshop in March 2018.



3. 4 – John Haycock demonstrating the simple knot used around the end of the nylon string attached to the iron tailpiece

My Instrument

My instrument was ordered to a custom specification and represented a significant investment and dedication into further study of the instrument and its integration into my studio compositional practice. The instrument was significantly larger than my previous instrument, with a larger calabash which Adam Doughty lined with resin to improve the sustain and accentuate its tonal characteristics. Stretched over the calabash was depilated deerskin from a venison farm in Southern England and this skin was attached to the calabash using functional black and chrome metal tacks. I asked for geometric patterns in



The Kora Workshop
Kath Pickering
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INVOICE

Partially paid

Invoice no.: PP001-2139
Invoice Date: 16 Apr 2018
Reference: Order 2338
Due date: 16 Apr 2018

Amount due:
£790.00

Bill To:

Hugh Shepherd
48 Farmer Street
Stockport
SK6 1NF
United Kingdom

Description	Quantity	Price	Amount
Bubinga Kora - 22 string 22 string kora with a Bubinga neck, handles and cross bar, bridge and pad, with chrome machine heads on a UK deerskin kora body	1	£890.00	£890.00
Bass machine heads (each replaces a treble)	4	£10.50	£42.00
Decorated Calabash	1	£38.50	£38.50
Built-in pickup and preamp Artec endpin preamp and 3 pin piezo pickup, fitted.	1	£122.50	£122.50
Kora Stand	1	£42.00	£42.00
Gig Bag - Medium Burgundy	1	£105.00	£105.00
Subtotal			£1,240.00
Total			£1,240.00
Amount paid			-£450.00
Amount due			£790.00 GBP

Notes

Payment to HSBC Bank account
The Kora Workshop
Sort Code 403311
Account Number 11517422
IBAN GB30HBUK40331111517422

Terms and Conditions

The Kora Workshop Ltd
Company Number 10438121
Registered Offices: Walldron Partnership, 1 Walcot Gate,
Walcot Street, Bath, UK

3. 5 - My Kora Workshop invoice detailing my kora order specification

addition to the functional pattern around the body because I wanted to introduce an element of modern design or aesthetic to my instrument to better reflect my individual identity. The neck and the bridge were made of machined *bubinga* hardwood from Equatorial West Africa, favoured for its strength to weight ratio and its visual resemble to rosewood. Adam Doughty further refined the wood with tung oil to bring out the deeper tones of the wood.

My instrument was fitted with 22 strings, 18 of which used guitar machine head tuners and 4 of which used bass head tuners, as I felt that they would give me more refined control of the bass strings. My 22nd string was an extra B flat bass string sitting against the top of the bridge, while the others rested in notches along the floating *bubinga* bridge's side. The instrument was fitted with an Artec endpin preamp, a Piezo pickup and a jack output for amplification. I travelled by train down to Hereford in May 2018 to collect my instrument. The instrument felt and sounded more refined than my previous kora and the larger body created a louder, fuller sound. The only downside to this improvement was in the added weight as I found that the new kora, in its gig bag, was larger, more unwieldy and



3. 6 - A photograph my new bubinga kora as I picked it up from Hereford in May 2018



3. 7 - Photograph taken by the Kora Workshop in April 2018 of the rear of the instrument showing the geometric tack patterns on the deerskin

heavier than the smaller kora I owned previously. The machine head tuners streamlined the tuning process and I found familiarity with them in their use and in relation to my guitar practice. This new instrument renewed my passion for the kora and it was rewarding and easier to use and to tune. Its sound and its appearance felt refined and it felt like a piece of art, not just an instrument, and something that I was proud of and enjoyed playing.

Bridge Alignment

The bridge of the instrument has tended to drift downwards or upwards in orientation with tuning and in April 2018, after laborious sessions relaxing the tension of all 22 strings to move the bridge back into its proper position to avoid any serious complications, it eventually collapsed flat against the body and broke several strings in the process. This led to my spending some hours relaxing the tension of strings in order to try to get the bridge back into alignment, but I continuously failed, eventually gave up and sent it to Adam Doughty from the Kora workshop to fix. Overall this resulted in several weeks and a measure of confidence, in addition to time, lost. There was also a certain paranoia that developed within my practice as I became anxious when tuning the instrument and would regularly inspect the instrument from the side where it always looked like it was slightly off centre, though some of this may have been my imagination. Ultimately the decision was made to begin Skype lessons and even to go back to Toulouse to spend more time with the Kora Workshop to learn more about the tuning interface, proper maintenance and care of my instrument, as well as undergoing daily tuition, enculturation and learning more traditional songs and techniques. Learning proper technique in terms of stringing



3. 8 - A photograph of Adam Doughty demonstrating a kora with the floating bridge removed and the strings flat to the body

and bridge alignment would hopefully inspire greater confidence in my kora practice. Interestingly this brings to light a cultural aspect of instrument maintenance in the West where a player uses ‘experts’ in music shops and makers to fix problems with their instrument and so never quite cultivate the knowledge or experience themselves. In West Africa, the player is quite often the maker as of the instrument that he plays in the case of the kora and so there exists a greater culture of self-reliance with regards to the maintenance and care of one’s instrument, leading to a deeper understanding of their instrument’s workings. There is something to be said for this approach and I intended to use my second enculturation week to better understand the workings of my instrument and its maintenance and care.

Organology, Technique and Maintenance Learning – Kora Workshop Learning Week

The second stay with the Kora Workshop in September 2018 was a learning-focused week with hours of daily lessons in addition to and around time spent with them in a more casual format, documented further in Appendix A through a detailed practice diary of my stay. It could be described therefore as a combination of formal and informal learning. Akinnaso’s ‘Schooling, Language and Knowledge in Literate and Nonliterate Studies’ states that formal learning “is a form of learning organized deliberately to fulfill the specific purposes of transmitting certain values, attitudes, skills

and forms of knowledge worthy of special transmission” (Akinnaso, 1992) and this describes my active tutoring time during my stay.

However, an important aspect to my stay with the Kora Workshop is the degree of informal learning that takes place between lessons and indeed while



3. 9 - A photograph taken of myself (left), Adam Doughty and my fellow student taking part in lessons in Toulouse, France in September 2018

practicing new parts or exercises – that of kora related conversations that permeated day to day life with these dedicated kora practitioners and their students as the relevant topics. Adam Doughty from the Kora Workshop described his inability to imagine life without the kora. Akinnaso describes this saying that “the content of learning is often inseparable from the teacher’s identity” (Akinnaso, 1992). The learning bears a resemblance to that of schooling in



3. 10 - A photograph of Adam Doughty of the Kora Workshop demonstrating the knot used on the nylon string during the stringing process in Toulouse 2018

a non-literate society in that demonstration and imitation provide the primary method in the absence of musical texts. This is typical of kora music as an oral tradition of hereditary storytelling and instrumental practice and attempts to notate kora music are recent phenomenon that are not widely in use. Despite breaking out of paternal or hereditary traditions within certain family names, kora learning remains an oral tradition of demonstration and imitation.

Fitting strings involved tying a weaver’s knot using black string looped around the steel tailpiece. A tight knot is then tied around the string with one end of the appropriate gauge of nylon string as shown here. The string is then fitted to the machine head on the neck, placed into the correct notch on the bridge and tightened similarly to a guitar string. It was often necessary to turn the peg several times in order to bring the string out of the neck so that you can bring the string closer to tension before tuning with the machine heads, as the cutout at the back of the neck is small and this makes it difficult to insert the string. Finally, any excess string length at the back of the neck is cut to complete the process. The bridge is realigned by carefully separating the two sets of strings around the floating bridge, placed upright in its final position on a placed pad on which the bridge sits. The lowest strings of the highest gauge are then pulled

up onto notches on the bridge several positions down from their notch to introduce the tension more gradually and to hold the bridge in place. The pad's position is then checked to make sure that it hasn't moved. The neck then begins to bend slightly as it accommodates the tension and the strings are brought up onto their notches before the rest of the strings are systemically brought up onto their resting positions on the notches.

Thereafter a process of retuning the strings regularly and possibly changing any strings that may have broken during the process takes place. During my stay I carried out most of this process on a kora that had a machine head neck fitted and strung the instrument, which gave me greater confidence in my ability to maintain my

instrument. In order to avoid any bridge collapse, one has to check the orientation of the bridge with respect to the pad and if it has begun to move due to tuning or a knock, one can grab the bridge with both hands (thumbs pressed against the top of the bridge either side and fingers supporting underneath the bridge) with the neck pointing directly away from you and move it firmly, but carefully back into place and retune. The force necessary to do this is both substantial and, unless a corner has moved vertically, must be equal on both thumbs against the top of the bridge and my experience of doing this were quite stressful. It is certainly a level of force that one must work up to, rather than down from, to avoid causing the bridge to collapse. Subsequent to the initial training and experience at the Kora workshop, I didn't need to reset the bridge for some time. However, during an ensemble rehearsal and under quite high-pressure circumstances I noticed the bridge to be leaning and had to carry out this process immediately, in order to fix it and continue to accompany my fellow ensemble members. Though stressful, this passed without significant trouble.



3. 11 - A photograph of myself in Toulouse with the Kora Workshop in September 2018 holding up the instrument that I had just restrung



3. 12 - A photograph of Adam Doughty of the Kora Workshop demonstrating the reconstruction of a kora bridge

Issues of Identity and Cultural Respect

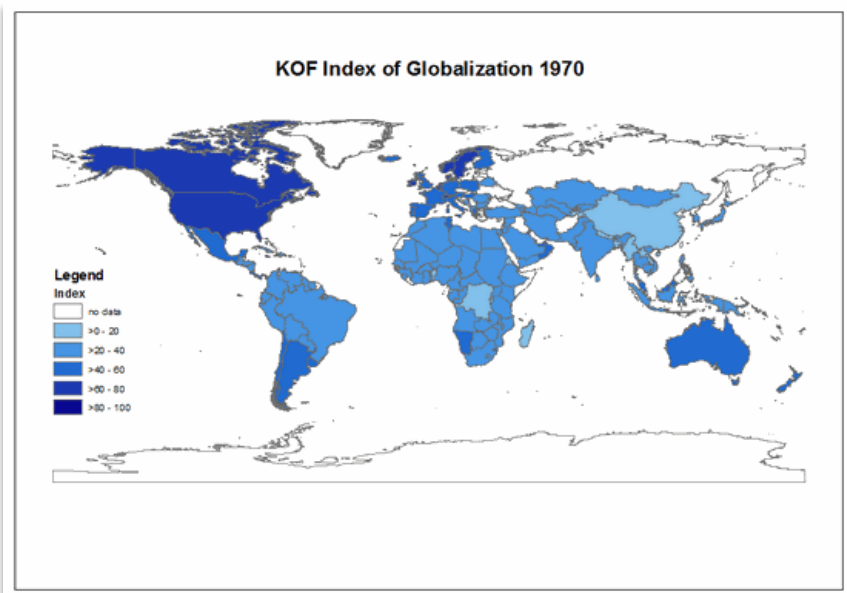
Participation in a musical space of foreign origin arguably involves achieving a balance between consideration of the issue of achieving respectful identity and creating a space where ambitious and experimental practice avoids disrespectful cultural appropriation. My solution to achieving this balance in my kora practice is to identify it as experimental rather than perpetration of a griot or aligning identity as part of that culture, so as to open up the compositional and collaborative potential, while respecting the origins of kora practitioners and their purpose. Nevertheless, it is difficult to measure the success of this strategy and it is not clear that my practice, when carried out in this way, should be overly constrained by the practice of others past and present. My identity as a studio composer and producer has created the desire to incorporate the sonorities of this instrument into my work and experiment with it as a compositional tool. The desire, furthermore, to carry out collaborative and ensemble practice in order to both improve my technique and explore the instrument's potential range of timbres and tonalities to be incorporated into my work in various spaces involves experimental practice and must not be overly limited by the traditions of the instrument with which I am working.

CHAPTER 4

Globalisation

Globalisation has enabled the possibility of a studio composer like myself picking up and learning the kora in an attempt to incorporate it into my compositional repertoire. It has also resulted in significant ethnomusicological studies and the emergence of the kora onto the world music scene itself has been enabled by globalisation in various crucial ways (McElroy, 2004). One key aspect to this musical change is that of lower boundaries to movement and communication in the modern world, where communication possibilities are near instantaneous and worldwide travel is not just possible but fast and increasingly affordable. This has enabled kora practitioners and griottes to take their instrument worldwide and become pioneers that play their instrument in city centres around Europe. This has also led to those completely removed from traditional griot culture picking up and playing the instrument and even learning to build them and create the kinds of adaptations that make it an easier instrument to pick up and play such as machine head tuners and pickup amplification. The kora itself evolved from instruments like the ‘soron’ recorded by French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget which, while it was tuned differently, had two sets of leather strings and shared the ‘contrapunal interlocking playing style’ of the kora (Duran, 2011).

In pre-colonial times the ‘bolon’, a 3 to 4 string calabash harp was used to accompany warriors into battle in Guinea and Mali and interestingly the instrument is now rarely seen in Mali spaces due to the association with violence (Duran, 2011). This kind of musical change driven by globalisation factors is crucial to understanding the kora’s rise on the world music scene. The development of and crucially



4. 1 - An index of degree of Globalisation by country

the globalisation of technology with regards to the kora have also enabled its rise in terms of the availability and increasingly low cost of recording equipment that griots can use to record albums and the kora pickups, microphones and speaker systems that amplify them to play to larger audiences and in new and interesting spaces. It has also enabled me, therefore, to be exposed to this instrument, to become interested in it and to learn about; its organology, its playing technique and its culture. As a British studio composer my intention is to incorporate kora sonorities into my compositional repertoire as a studio composer.

Musical Change

Musical change can be defined as the development of music and its spaces over the linear passage of time, which serves to provide points of comparison across the timeline back and forth. Music marches to globalisation's drum and exploration, trade, religion, migration and war influence composers and their music, according to Richard Boursy of Yale Global (Boursy, 2007). Musical fusions like Jazz, an American product drawing from both African and European sources, are not a new phenomenon but have been accelerated rapidly by the radio, plane and internet which streamline travel and communication in ways that were not possible or conceivable historically (Boursy, 2007). John Blacking wrote significant ideas about musical change and the question of indulging in tradition as it was, even resisting change and the ideas of musical authenticity. He argued that the traditionalist's argument had some merit in non-change and the retention of cultural values under the threat of 'anarchy' within the musical space. The argument for musical change, however, celebrates the vigorous adaptation of musical spaces to changing social conditions, such as in the increasingly globalised world. Change could therefore result in a dilution of cultural values through fusions and collaborative pressures, and purism could fall down in its failure to adapt to changing social conditions from which the music is created and in which it is enjoyed. Blacking stated that he thought that:

"The retention of traditional music can be enlightening and positively adaptive as it can be maladaptive and stultifying: the meaning of musical change or non-change depends on their structural and functional characteristics in the particular context under review"
(Blacking, 1977)

He also sought to distinguish an innovation within a flexible system and radical change from variation. Innovation within a flexible system is experimentation within a space with a degree of

creative freedom in practice that creates variation and allows for musical change over time, facilitating the development of new ideas in the space. Radical change is where the musical space in question changes so much that its identifiable characteristics change, and the result is a space that could be described as a new space entirely, divorced enough from its origins that it can no longer be considered to be the same thing. This radical change is the kind of musical change that is generally the most contentious, as even for those who accept change over time as a natural process, the disappearance of traditional characteristics could represent the loss of the space, while by this very definition signals the birth of a new one. There lies a difficulty here in distinguishing musical behaviour from social behaviour.

Blacking reminds us that ethnomusicological method requires that all ethnic perceptions of music be considered when distinguishing music from other social activities (Blacking, 1977). An example of early Western influence on African music as a result of colonialism is that of the Christian Church which took the view that “music itself must be spiritual in order to be suitable for all things eternal” which ethnomusicologist Thus Wachsmann suggests has influenced the development of African music ever since (Blacking, 1977). Hugh Tracey wrote further ideas on the development of African spaces, stating that: “African music is not a museum piece.....oral music evolves, all the time – it can never be static” (Tracey, Colonial Authenticity, Modernity and the Ideal African, 1954). He is trying to get across here that we must try not to view ethnomusicology as a study of music from the past but the continually evolving art that it remains. The adoption and the fusion of Western musical styles with African musical styles and the influence of each on the other has become a significant factor in understanding this space. Current Western popular music currently contains Afro-Caribbean influences as can be seen in the ‘afro swing’ space that has taken hold in dance music, and Western popular music styles and influences can be seen clearly in modern kora music such as in the common implementation of Western instrumental accompaniment; drum kits and acoustic guitars as in Sona Jobarteh’s band (Sona Jobateh, 2016). Hugh Tracey analyses the effects of colonialism resulting in the contemporary co-existence of:

“the *original folk music*... still the music of the great majority, far more active than some would have us believe, *music in decay*, eclipsed both by foreign prejudice and by indigenous gullibility, and thirdly, *music in reconstruction*, a state of affairs in which the melting pot is throwing up new forms of music, good, bad and indifferent, all of them

strongly coloured by intrinsically African characteristics” (Tracey, Colonial Authenticity, Modernity and the Ideal African, 1954)

Key Related Practitioners and their Approaches

I intend to become proficient at playing this instrument separated from my practice. However, I also intend to incorporate the kora into my compositional repertoire. There are key practitioners that I have spent time with and those that are at the forefront of the Kora’s emergence on the world music scene that approach their kora practice in different ways. My original tutor John Haycock uses a traditional kora using *konso* tuning rings and plays in a traditional style, but he supplements this in using an array of electronics and other instrumentation in his compositional practice. Through the use of loop pedals he builds complex textures over time. Using an octave pedal he gives his kora greater range and using delays and reverbs to give the kora a sense of space and additional movement. Over this Kora-based bed of sound John plays the clarinet and additionally punctuates the music with beats created by tapping the Kora’s body and handles in different ways that are amplified by the Kora’s pickup inside the calabash and using the loop pedal to create loops of percussive material. John primarily uses his kora practice in busking and event scenarios, playing gigs and playing in town and city centres to the public. John Haycock’s practice can be described as kora focused and he uses a variety of creative effects and signal processing to create a wide range of different material from his instrument. John Haycock uses his kora practice in busking and live performance spaces to earn a living from his kora practice.



4. 2 - A photo of John Haycock taken from a 'Sofar Sounds' performance on YouTube, playing his kora fitted with konso tuning rings but with signal running through an array of digital signal processing pedals

Interestingly, my first encounter of the kora was encountering John busking and this public performance context is arguably an important vehicle of exposure. Passive audience spaces and passive to active audience transitions, which occur as a performer catches their attention and they become involved in the music, expose the instrument to people who otherwise may never have heard or come across it. John Haycock told me that jalis like Jali Kuyateh are using this technique across Europe to earn money that they can send home to their villages in West Africa in order to improve their standard of living. This is an interesting example of the survival of the social significance of kora practitioners as well as their representative and authoritative nature.

Holly Marland is another practicing Manchester-based kora player who plays a kora with machine head tuners. She has regular appearances on BBC Radio 4 and plays as part of several orchestral groups, as well as fulfilling her charity-based work with ‘Music in Hospitals’ and patients in hospitals in the UK and in New York. Her practice is both as a single entity and as accompaniment to a range of other instrumentation in her orchestral work. The charity work aims to provide quality music to aid in the healing and happiness of sick people. Holly Marland has even fitted coloured strings to her kora as part of her work with children in hospitals.

Adam Doughty from the Kora Workshop, a kora organization making koras and teaching people how to play them over the internet, in England, in France and in Senegal, shares some typicality with John in that he is a British born kora player, maker and teacher approaching the musical style respectfully in terms of technique and compositional approach. He makes his koras differently, however, using a variety of different woods including *keno* and *bubinga* and sourcing deer skins from a British farm to use on his koras. Adam Doughty also installs machine head tuners on his instruments, using a machined, hollowed centre in the neck to string his instruments. While he does not



4.3 - A photograph taken post-interview of Holly Marland with her kora fitted with machine head tuners

usually experiment with signal processing of his koras, he is working on a project that aims to create a MIDI compatible kora instrument that could be used to play any MIDI instrument through a computer or interface. This is interesting with regards to my studio compositions as a familiar instrument



4. 4 - Adam Doughty of the Kora Workshop teaching a student in a traditional oral fashion of demonstration and imitation with personal guidance

other than keys that could be used to play and record any instrument within my digital workspace is an appealing idea indeed and could lead to different expressive qualities and greatly expanding the envelope of potential sonority that can be accessed. For remarkable kora players that do not possess any keyboard skills, such an invention could facilitate greater experimental practice within the space and lead to more musical change.

There are parallels to be found with John Haycock's kora approach in my practice in terms of the use of creative effects such as delay and reverb, and in the traditional playing techniques that he passed onto me through his tutelage. My practice has experimented with the use of effects pedals to expand the sonic possibilities of the kora too, though my primary practice as a studio composer leads me to work more frequently 'in the box' within Logic in order to edit, loop and effect my sounds. The immediacy of pedals only attracted me in ensemble work, where I used a small effects pedal to create additional complementary texture and alternative timbre to my sound. In terms of incorporating the kora into my studio compositional repertoire, working within my digital audio workspace to retain permanent control over the digital signal processing of the recorded kora material, and the extended possibilities provided by an extensive range of digital 'plugins' within that space were preferable in my kora practice overall. Furthermore, in practice I found myself to be more compliant with the traditional playing style in tutelage when

playing the instrument in ensemble spaces and using limited sound sculpting in terms of effects. I found that I behaved in a more experimental fashion when using the kora in studio compositional contexts; experimenting with grain synthesis, time stretching and layering of kora parts in a manner that tended to expand the kora's sonorities more than in the accompaniment contexts in which I placed myself.

Holly Marland's practice also shares some commonalities with my own. Her tuition with Jali Susso leads her similarly to my own tendency to play with a fairly traditional technique of *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* lines. Holly Marland's kora playing is similar to mine as she regularly writes to and accompanies a wide variety of instrumentation in her orchestra-based work. Her approach to her music, it could be argued, is less experimental in its acoustic form than my own approach to my kora music in terms of signal processing and is partly dedicated to charity work. Her social work and the use of the kora as a healing tool has some parallels with traditional jelia work as used for social occasions and throughout its history as a tool for socio-economic change and feeling-inspired music. My own kora music attempts to break into the potential for the kora to be used more as a tool in studio composition with which one can make a wide variety of different sonic textures. Like my own practice, Holly aims to accompany with her kora and treats it as an expansive repertoire of sonority that is capable of accompanying a wide variety of instrumentation. But unlike Holly, my practice ventures into studio compositional contexts that tend to warp and expand the potential sonorities in ways that her collaborative ensemble work often does not.

Compositions

While learning the Max Signal Processing framework during a previous programming-focused module, I endeavored to create a program that played a quasi-randomised emergent composition suitable for ambient soundscapes in a museum or installation of some kind and reminiscent of Brian Eno's 'Music for Airports'. This is a previous submission which now deserves a brief evaluation in the context of my experimental kora practice and giving context to my further electro-acoustic composition 'Kora Concrète'. The sound sampled, buffered, grain-stretched and signal processed was that of a kora sampled from an album by Jali Kuyateh and John Haycock. This was a novel way to attempt composition of kora music and could easily have ended up lacking musical tonality and structure so as to make it unlistenable. This is partly because emergence and unique playback characteristics force one to use randomised elements in the program that force one to let go of complete control, and instead create controlled upper and lower numerical boundaries within which the randomised elements can be affected. The compositional process was also quite unlike working within a digital audio workstation and worked in a far more linear and visually and crucially inner-connected format using virtual patch cables to link visual 'objects' of code together.

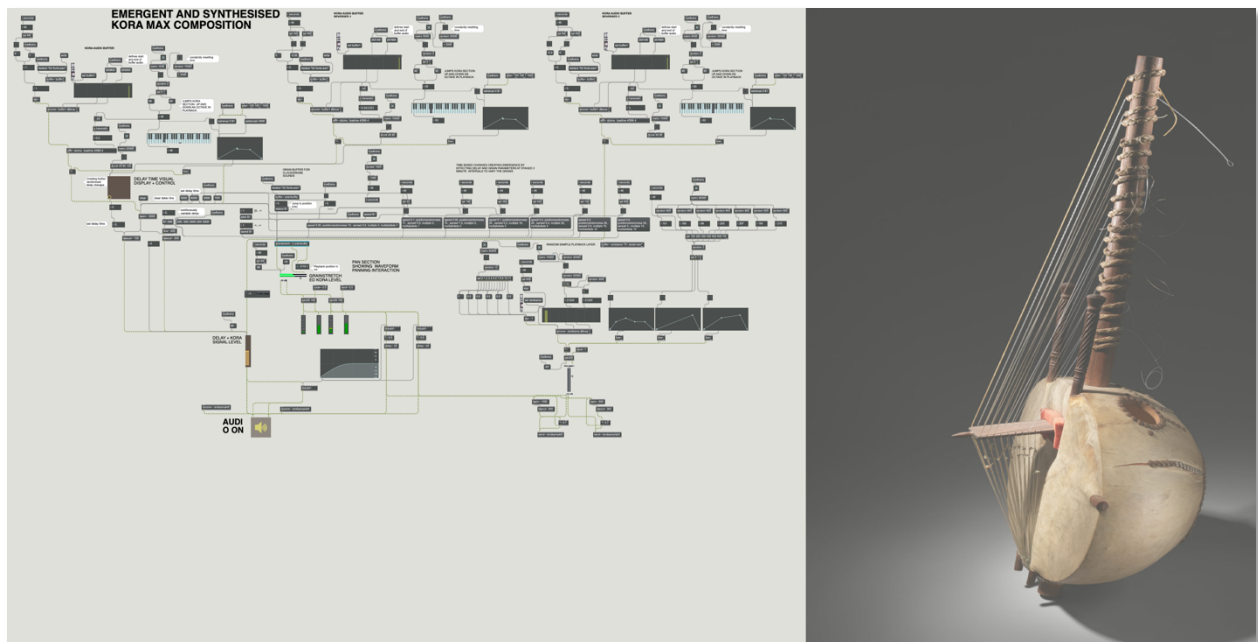


Figure 5 1 - A screenshot of my Max MSP program creating a quasi-randomised emergent kora composition through visual programming-based signal processing techniques

Compositional Process

Right from the offset my intention while composing ‘Kora Concrète’ was to build upon my previous experimental incorporation of kora sonorities into novel studio compositional contexts and bringing this experimental methodology into my primary digital workspace, Logic Pro. This method of working forced me to approach the use of the kora from a studio compositional perspective and more divorced from its origins than my normal inclinations by utilising grain synthesis and time-based signal processing combined with field recordings of natural environments. My compositional intentions were to create a gesture-based piece using phrasing to introduce the elements of the piece gradually, and in combination with one another, building up to a climax of all elements that present a chaotic soundstage. I intended that this chaotic soundstage would fall away to and give key prominence to my favourite textural element: a time-stretched, pitched kora sample that gives a mournful, cello-like quality in opposition to the often optimistic, bright sound of the kora and in juxtaposition to the calming natural field recording textural elements utilized in the piece. This ending is intended to create uncertainty in its emotional implications for the listener by removing the kora far from its natural sound and into a disturbing and novel aural plane. In order to further accentuate the mournful feel of the ending, a sympathetic drone choir part was composed underneath this texture. All of the composition for the piece was off-grid and timing was free and unrestrained to allow the gestures and the overall dynamic to shape the structure.

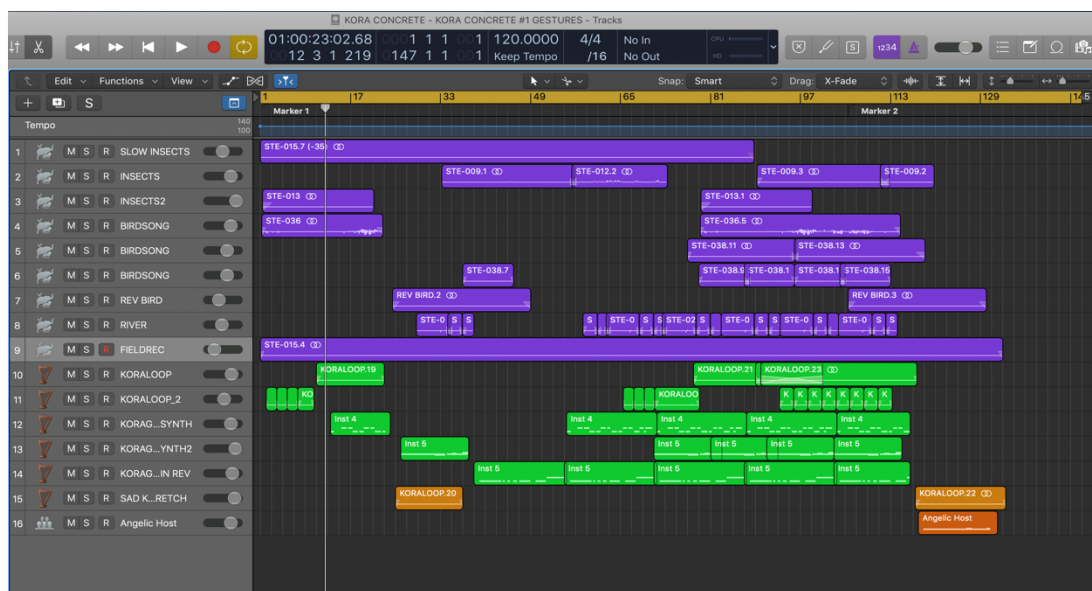


Figure 5 2 - A screenshot of the Kora Concrète Logic Pro project, showing the overall structure of the piece. Note that the project's tempo has not been altered from its default at 120BPM, and has not been adhered to during the compositional process

Field Recording

My subjective views of this piece at conception were inspired by my perception of the kora as an instrument played traditionally in natural, unindustrialized settings. This led to the desire to gather extensive natural field recording materials to layer over the piece, ground the soundstage in this feeling of natural space and to create emotionally evocative opposition to the heavily processed elements which were then layered and juxtaposed within the digital workspace. These field recordings were gathered using a Zoom H4N, chosen for its balanced portability and stereo performance, during late August of 2018 in the Burgundy countryside in France and include; insects and nesting sparrows recorded at dusk, and birdsong and disturbing water with wood at the river during daylight hours. My perception of the piece as emotionally provocative and the creation of uncertainty of space was to be enhanced by the opposition of night and daytime as represented by these textual elements. This was intended to create further uncertainty of place for the listener in combination with the technical processing decisions affecting the aural plane.



Figure 5 3 - Photographs of field recording taking place during August 2018 in Burgundy, France in daylight by the river and at dusk while I conceptualised and began composing *Kora Concrete*

Technical Process + Interface

This piece utilised several recorded kora sampled loops from another kora recording session, manipulated in various key ways to shape the sonorities of the kora and create novel textural elements. In order to connect the composition to the kora sonically, kora samples were brought into Logic Pro'sAlchemy synthesiser and in particular utilising its grain synthesis capabilities to create playable instruments with sonorities reminiscent of the source material. To create more unusual experimental background layering, textures that create uncertainty in the listener in opposition to the natural textures and create a more consistent narrative as such throughout the piece, I experimented with extreme time-stretching and pitching to create unusual drone sounds and pads from the insect recordings. I aimed to create a cohesive sense of perceived physical space amongst the sounds in terms of signal processing through commonly using reverbs and stereo delays to give elements space and movement at the side of the stereo field and gentle chorus modulation to give sounds greater width and a more modulating tonality.

Compositional Outcome

This composition succeeded in bringing kora sonorities into my familiar digital workspace Logic Pro and in further nurturing an experimental, studio composition-oriented approach to my kora practice. My identity as a studio composer led the composition's development here by considering how the textures could be manipulated and processed to achieve the various form, gesture and feeling-based outcomes discussed. The composition took some inspiration, however, from my perceptions of the kora's cultural placement and in the perceived sympathetic textures found in natural spaces which both ground and unsettle the sense of place through the piece using the processing and arrangement techniques discussed.

‘Keke’

Compositional intention

Keke means ‘to be’ in Mandinka, a key language of the Gambia. This piece was conceived as an attempt to compose an intuition-led piece based around a core structure of traditionally styled kora *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* lines while retaining an ambitious compositional intent through the use of natural field recording textures, synthesis and voice accompaniment. The desired outcome was a piece of music that embodied my own feelings about the instrument and its placement through intuition-led improvisation and sound selection. I felt that it was also important in this piece to represent my perceptions of the kora’s placement in natural unindustrialised settings through the use of natural field recordings recorded in Burgundy in August 2018.

Compositional Process

In order to create a traditional African feel, the process began with respectful, sympathetic improvisation utilising sympathetic instruments with direct associations to the kora. First a set of riffs were composed on the kora in a traditional style of *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* lines, over which pace tempering harmonies were layered. To create tonal complexity in the low end, the *bolon* calabash bass harp, which has a feel of free untempered tuning), was layered under the *kumbengo* kora bassline. Representing the fusion and intricate connections of African rhythm to music, a percussive idiophone *balafon* part was composed as a melodic contour around a tribal hand-drum kit in order to create a truly melodic rhythm overtone blurring the lines between



Figure 5 4 - Native Instrument's Balafon Kontakt instrument, used to create melodic overtones to the rhythm with the intention of blurring the lines between music and rhythm

the rhythmic parts and their musical elements through their sympathetic percussive timbres. Attempting to free my creativity in composing this piece, while retaining the cohesive natural sound conceived, I created soft synthesised textures.

The addition of found sounds such as birdsong further grounds the composition in natural textures and gives a natural feel to the aural plane. In further efforts to follow my intuition and enhance the composition through connecting the piece to myself and to my voice I felt inspired to track some simple ad-lib style vocals over the track. In keeping with my perceptions of my identity with respect to the kora and towards traditional techniques, I aimed to compose in line with my perceived notions of the kora as having a human feel, while avoiding imitation of traditional jali song and storytelling techniques through creating my own style of vocal accompaniment. In order to create a more intriguing chorus section, I departed from my choice of obviously sympathetic textures and instrumentation to include a further synthesized vocal part. The part is oriental in style which, juxtaposed, creates an interesting gestural interaction. In order to create a signaling melodic element in the breakdowns with a timbre similar to a church bell, a tubular bell was programmed into the piece.

Technical Process + Interface

This piece relied heavily on my digital workspace as the interface, once the kora parts had been composed and recorded into Logic Pro. A crucial part of the technical process in terms of the vocal elements was to tackle my inconsistency of pitch using Logic Pro's Flex pitch correcting to not only smooth out the pitch of the parts but also creatively in order to create artificial harmonies that provide an interesting melodic contour during the chorus sections. The layering of a modulated synth bass layered over the sub and kora bass notes gave the notes a feeling of movement and introduced textural complexity using a low frequency oscillation filtering technique. Inspired by my studio compositional practice in the dance music space, I layered a sub bass over the bassline that creates a rounded low end for the track overall, though I found that this particular stylistic context called for a much subtler implementation of this technique.

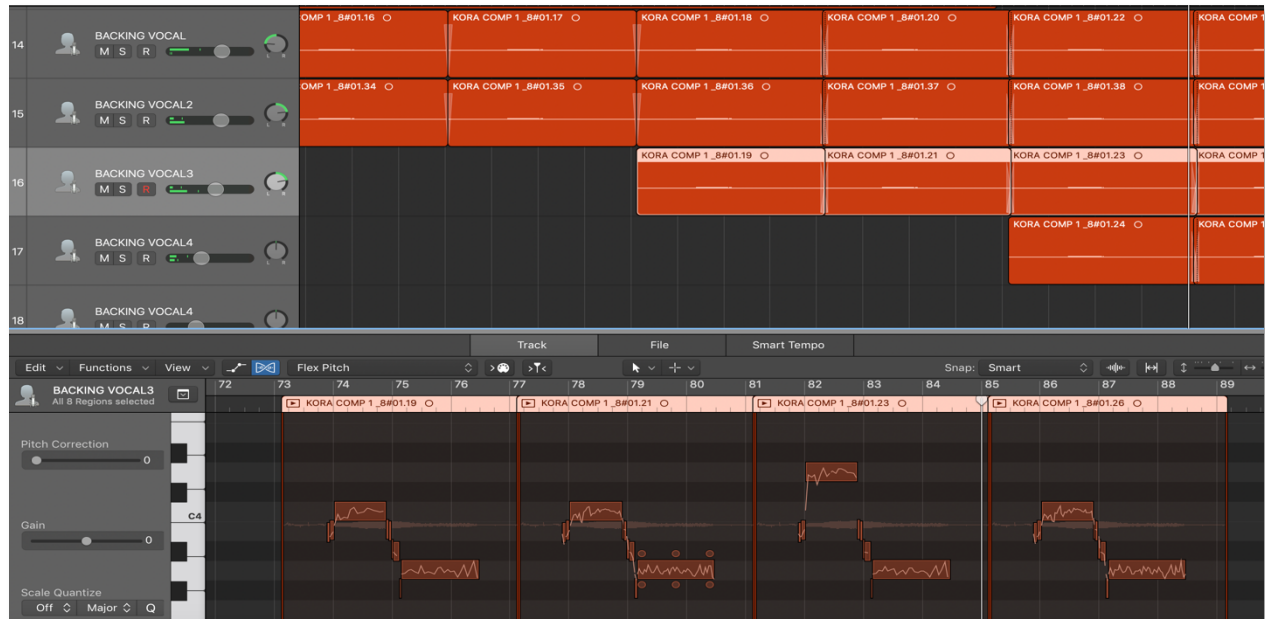


Figure 5 5 - A screenshot of the Keke Logic Pro project, showing the layering of backing vocal elements enhanced with artificial harmonies using the Flex Pitch function

Compositional Outcome

An important outcome of this piece was its success in identifying not only sympathetic elements that can be used in accompaniment to my practice with the kora, but also homing in on and providing greater understanding of which kora sonorities attracted me initially, causing me to embark on this journey. Through its intuitive conception and implementation, the composition also led me out of my comfort zone and into exploring potential vocal accompaniment in my own style but consistent with my intentions of respectful practice through non-imitation. While the piece represents a traditional and respectful set of core West African elements, I succeeded in placing the composition in its perceived place in my mind through the use of natural field recordings, as well as introducing creative, experimental elements such as the voice, digital processing techniques and synthesisers used which introduce interesting textural and gestural interactions to the piece.

Kora Dance Music – “Fusion”

Compositional Intention

The composition was named Fusion as this composition represents the culmination of my experimental and respectful kora practice in incorporating kora sonorities into my primary studio compositional practice style – energetic dance music. My compositional intention was to create an extended piece which seamlessly transitions between my primary stylistic orientations which are currently *house* and *drum and bass* music. I wanted this piece to reflect the learning outcomes of the various practice pathways undertaken during this project and include the various techniques developed and discovered during my journey. Furthermore, this piece was to expand my sound palette through signalling a more ambitious approach to my dance music composition generally. This was to be achieved by finding a fine balance between an ambitious compositional approach with varied, complex musical elements and the intended purpose of the music as for club and dancing spaces.

Compositional/ Technical Process + Interface

In light of the nature of this piece as the incorporation of kora sonorities into my primary studio compositional repertoire, and my perceptions of my identity as a studio composer despite my instrument practice, the lines between my compositional or technical process and interface become blurred. It seems prudent to address the development of this composition without undue distinction of these categories. This piece was primarily constructed using my main digital audio workspace, Logic Pro. The piece began with the intuition-led composition of the *drum and bass* section at 88bpm utilising techniques and sounds typical of my production style; sampling and synthesis. Through carefully considered and gradual automation of the master tempo track between sections to facilitate the transitional section between tempos I created an introductory *house* section at 128bpm with the same sound palette. By using the note E as the tonic I utilised modal relationships common to these genres to make the kora more compatible in terms of the compositional process of the kora parts and to free my playing across the strings. I composed and recorded a simple *kumbengo* bass part for each section before selecting sections at both speeds and creating take folders of kora improvisation using the loop function. In order to impart my style and proficiency with the instrument I kept my playing free and unrestrained. I intended to impart the kora’s sonorities into the aural plane through parts that, while sympathetic to the other elements and textures, do not hold back from displaying clarity in identity through the music.

My intentions were to display the range of kora sonorities discovered, both typical and atypical of the instrument, through utilisation of the techniques learned through my respectful tuition led practice, as well as my ensemble and experimental practice.

To access the interesting percussive textural potential of the kora body and accentuate the powerful drum parts important for a dance piece's energy, I created hand drumming parts for both sections by hitting the calabash with my fingers, palms and knuckles which is picked up by the pickup inside the body. To reduce the timekeeping variance of my kora drumming and align it with the consistent stylistic timing of the sampled and arranged MIDI drum parts I quantised the audio using the flex audio editing function in Logic. The drumming technique contains subtle textural elements provided by the sympathetic vibration of the strings due to the transfer of vibrational energy, which a drum does not share. To create timbral complexity through the creation of a carefully layered textural element, I used stereo width, compression and overdrive effects to create a distorted copy of the kora body rhythmic elements with additional harmonics, tonality and which inhabited greater width across the aural plane. In order to create unusual textural elements sympathetic to the kora parts I time-stretched one of the kora parts recorded and copied it (as in the kora concrète experimental approach), pitching one two octaves down to access the sometimes cello, sometimes clarinet-like quality of the resulting sound. To create a

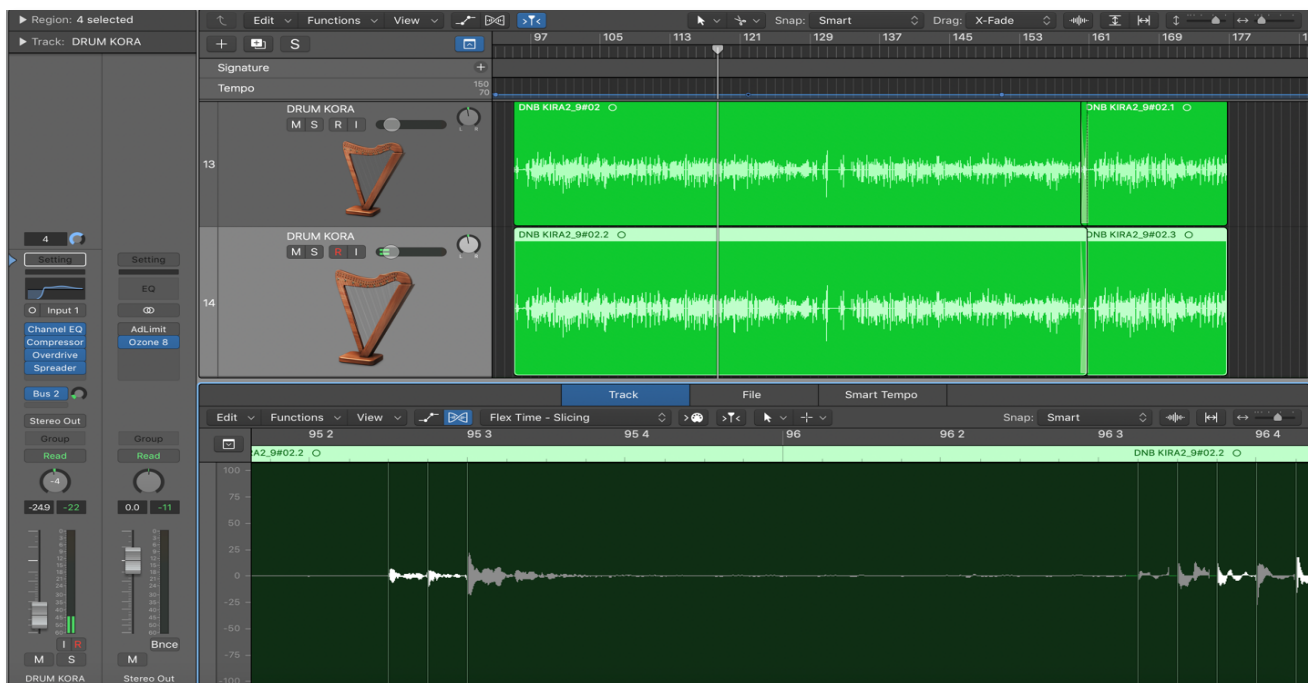


Figure 5 6 - A screenshot showing percussive kora layers with the layered channel effects shown in the track inspector on the left and showing the flex time slicing mode in the audio editor at the bottom used to quantise the audio

‘call and response’ relationship between the musical elements and rhythmic elements, I added female chanting samples that also assist the kora in creating a more human feel to the music in a stylistic approach typical of the genre. I hoped, furthermore, to signal the arrival of the beginning of sections such as the kora solo using white noise samples designed for assisting section dynamics and adding textural complexity through the creation of gestural layers with the crash cymbals.

Compositional Outcome

This piece holds significance in the compositional repertoire of this project in the combination of various techniques and sonorities accessed in my kora practice into my primary stylistic orientation as a studio composer. The result is a piece of music with unique identity in terms of its combination of kora sonorities into dance music, its non-conformity with dance music repertoire and its dual-genre transitional nature. It represents the final, and in my own feelings the most significant, development of my kora practice in its successful incorporation into my main musical output and both proof that kora sonorities can be implanted into dance music, and develop unique identity and stylism of my dance music through the incorporation of my kora practice. The nature of the kora’s interface and its effect on playing style, and the unique familiar, yet unfamiliar textural elements provided by experimental digital processing techniques as well as the utilisation of the instrument’s body to percussive effect create potent, yet to most, unidentifiably exotic sonorities across the aural plane, which help to create unique identity within my studio compositional practice.

Ensemble Practice in Accompaniment

Participating in and preparing for performances with the World Music Ensemble and the Contemporary Music Group created biweekly opportunities to explore the kora's potential in accompaniment. These band-type situations presented the challenges of contribution in response to the piano, flute, guitars, percussion, electronics, trumpet, saxophone, action harp, voice and accordion involved in the ensembles. These instruments often followed musical texts in the form of mensural notation which I am not able to read fluently and so my reliance on my hearing was crucial to guide my response to the auditory stimuli coming in from the other members of the ensembles. In the absence of musical texts, however, gesture based and conducted interactions led the ensemble which encouraged both gestures typical of the instrument and gestures atypical for that particular instrument. The former forced one to carefully consider what key associations your instrument possessed; in this case I decided that for many, the kora sounds like a harp and so I would strum across the strings. The latter was useful in that it encouraged me to carefully consider how I might create gestures atypical of the kora, an instrument with no frets or obvious ways to manipulate a string after it has been plucked or strummed.

I discovered precisely through this experimental process that if I plucked or strummed the strings under the bridge it had a rough, atonal texture quite unlike the kora's natural sound. This process was key in my overall perceptions of my instrument in that it forced me to consider and identify the instrument's typical sonorities, and then deliberately do something entirely different. This felt like a useful exercise in letting go of one's sensibilities when it comes to their instrument and experiment without boundary. Further gestural experimentation led to my purchasing a small, portable effects pedal unit to allow me to signal process my gestures creatively during ensembles, for example by adding a long delay effect and chorus to allow my gestures to repeat and fade out, all the while modulating slightly in pitch. A further key learning outcome of this process was in developing my perception of place with respect to my kora practice. Moving from learning traditional songs on the kora where the kora takes musical precedence in its leading role and musical complexity, to working in a complementary manner with many other musicians and indeed knowing when not to play at all created a need to readdress my perception of place. In ensemble-type situations and in the creation of gestures the power of and need for silence were new concepts with respect to my kora practice.



Figure 5 7 - My effects unit which I bought and used frequently in ensemble situations, particularly for gestural interactions atypical of my instrument

While my inability to read music in real time meant that I could not follow the score precisely, I feel that it freed my contribution in terms of its modal or experimental potential and this would often lead to some interesting results. Furthermore, I could read the notes in preparation and practise first with the bass note line; a process with direct parallels to my traditional kora tuition which taught me my note arrangement on the kora over a period of time which became extremely useful when accompanying. Difficulties arose, however, when the scales or the tonal centres used either changed rapidly, making it difficult to follow their progress using only my ears. I learned that my playing could be free and unrestrained in F Major, D Minor, C Major (if I tuned my kora to 'Suarta' by naturalising my Bs) and in certain modes of F Major, but I found it much more difficult and less enjoyable when the scale did not fit at all and I had barely a few notes available to accompany. This learning outcome is significant in that it caused me to realise that traditional kora playing is free and unrestrained but within a single key, which is why those types of accompaniment challenges felt so different.

I soon identified that while I was pleased with my contributions on the whole, in order to accompany more effectively I would benefit from some Western music theory application to my technique; for example, learning my scales in order to facilitate a process of rapid tuning decisions, identifying what would often be only a few strings that needed to be tuned, and make use of my machine head tuners in easily making changes in order to free all of the strings' potential. The inability to perform these adjustments quickly created a significant learning outcome in that situations inspired me to consider what other sonorities could be accessed,

through which I learned to create percussive timbres by striking the calabash body and wooden handles which, when amplified, created drum or bongo-like sounds that enabled me to join the percussive members in accompanying I also found that if I plucked or brushed the strings underneath the kora bridge it created an unusual atonal sound with a dull tonality and a rough timbre. It is noteworthy that I would almost always need to amplify in order to be heard in these ensemble situations, and though this made percussive sounds easier to produce, I thought that the kora lost detail, particularly in the higher frequency range, compared to its acoustic sound which I found to be preferable. The ensembles would occasionally require group vocals to shout or sing key parts of choruses together, particularly the capoeira songs which are group songs by nature and interestingly atonal, which I felt helped to inspire confidence after a period of time in the members to make their parts heard more clearly, where before they were occasionally muted and cautious.

World Music Ensemble

The World Music Ensemble, led by Justine Loubser, involved styles of traditional music from around the world including; Hungarian, Cuban, Romanian, Nordic, West African and Brazilian Capoeira styles. On the whole it represented a respectful and traditional pathway of accompaniment exploration with the kora, while presenting varied stylism that led to varied responses in terms of kora contribution. The ensemble rehearsals led up to two consecutive performances; at the Salford University Maxwell building cafeteria and at the Atmosphere Bar in the Student's Union the following week. I led two West African songs with the group that I had learned for both performances and there are a few remarkable aspects and learning outcomes associated with leading the group. I felt relieved at the time to be leading in the sense that in this case my playing could be free and unrestrained within the overall agreed structure of the songs, while the other members of the group accompanied my performance. The group accompanied effectively faster than for any other song that we performed together, in my opinion, and this led me to wonder whether the songs were audibly led by my intuition and so possessed truly remarkably effective ease of accompaniment potential for groups, despite the kora songs being self-supporting by nature. We were able to sing the songs, thanks to Justine's familiarity with Mandinka and her having learned the lyrics and melodies, which gave the performance the kind of human feel that vocals can provide and which I feel the kora benefits from. The Atmosphere performance went more smoothly, I felt, and the video of the performance is included in the

accompanying body of work, as well as a recording of one of the songs from the West African spaces that I led, 'Banile'. The ensemble created learning outcomes that vastly improved my playing ability and technique, as well as my potential to accompany others. It created the kind of thinking methodology in my kora practice that could enable broader studio compositional application in terms of compositional techniques, composing riffs using improvisational techniques, and with regards to how much, if at all, to play based on the specific parameters of the situation in question. In this way it built greater confidence in my ability to incorporate kora sonorities into my studio compositional repertoire.



Figure 5 8 - Rehearsing with the World Music Ensemble at Salford University in Autumn 2018

Contemporary Music Group

The Contemporary Music Group, led by Alan Williams, represented the more experimental pathway with respect to my exploration of the kora as a tool in accompaniment. This meant that it created more opportunities and even restrictive scenarios, like the atypical gestural sound production mentioned previously, that led to more unexpected learning outcomes. This was achieved through the creation of an innovative, flexible system through a relaxed, respectful atmosphere within the group that allowed for free and innovate thinking and experimentation. One of the most useful exercises practiced was the group and individual solo space, where we

would each play for a certain period of time over a given drone constant, which was in many cases the experimental synthesised sounds provided by Eirik Dyroy, a PhD student researching unusual scale interfaces. The feeling that nothing was ‘wrong’ in these sessions produced some truly interesting and provocative results from the members. Some of the improvisations, however, were carried out in groups around the double bass playing of noteworthy player Michael Cretou who brought ‘Balkan Connection’ to the ensemble. I found that with no tuning whatsoever, I was able to create a sort of modal riff that I was extremely pleased with and enjoyed playing immensely. My contributions were not always as effective, however, and the tonal centre changed constantly in some of the experimental and complex pieces played by the group which made it very difficult for me to accompany effectively except with some textual gestures that were encouraged but felt to me off-key. The rehearsals led to a performance in the large band room, included as video in the accompanying body of work, which took place with a direct audience, where before the audience for the World music performances were passive drinkers and diners. This led to a more intimate, and honestly more nerve-wracking feeling among the performers. The performance went extremely well, however, inspiring further confidence in my ability to accompany with the kora in even quite challenging, experimental contexts. An ensemble session resulted in the recording of Alan Williams’ version of ‘Four Dirges’ which I have mixed and included in my compositional portfolio.



Figure 5 9 - Performing with the Contemporary Music Group in November 2018

Duet Accompaniment

I wanted to further explore the kora's potential in accompaniment through a pair of sympathetic duets. One duet took place with Phil Brissenden and his action harp, and the other with my luthier father Martin Shepherd playing one of his early instruments. These duets presented different, more intricate challenges than the much larger ensemble groups and required even more careful consideration, in terms of the sparser soundscape that the duets presented, to the roles of authority and gestural interactions between the instruments. A significant outcome of these compositional processes was the most effective working methodology resulting from these interactions, of recording separately and to a metronome, in order to maintain creative control over the edits and to create the most pleasing compositional outcomes.

Action Harp Duet – 'Harp Dream'

The reverse action piano harp that formed part of both ensemble groups had identifiably complementary sonorities which led to the desire to create a composition. This duet began with a series of riffs structured loosely, around which several improvisational sessions took place, where we experimented in a free fashion and made several recordings. We found, however, that recording together simultaneously sometimes created differences in direction in terms of our playing. These differences in direction also created editing issues due to the bleed between the microphones when playing together, and this led to a new working methodology. I recorded the song's riffs alone on the kora, staying as much in time as possible, before passing the project onto my partner to accentuate my playing in a more controlled fashion that could be analysed and edited more freely to produce a more pleasing result. The resulting composition had significant learning outcomes in terms of working methodology when recording in accompaniment scenarios with the kora. It further proves the potential of these two instruments for powerful gestural interaction and interesting compositional outcomes. This duet was effectively led by my kora parts, which I had composed previously and so the piece evolved around this compositional foundation in opposition to the lute duet that followed.

Lute Duet – ‘Recercar’

My father Martin Shepherd has been playing and making lutes for over thirty years and it seemed an interesting avenue of exploration in terms of the kora’s accompaniment potential as a 17th century, West African, Islamic instrument, with respect to the lute – a 15th century instrument related to the Islamic ‘oud’. The name ‘Recercar’ relates to a style of Renaissance composition, which often serves as the introduction to another composition and identifies its key or modal characteristics. This particular lute-based Recercar piece was chosen by my father due to its compatibility in remaining around F Major. The composer Marco Dall'Aquila (c.1480-after 1538) was active in Venice, and although he was given a privilege to publish lute tablature in 1505, most of his surviving works are preserved only in this manuscript shown in Figure 5 10 from the library in Munich which originated in Augsburg.

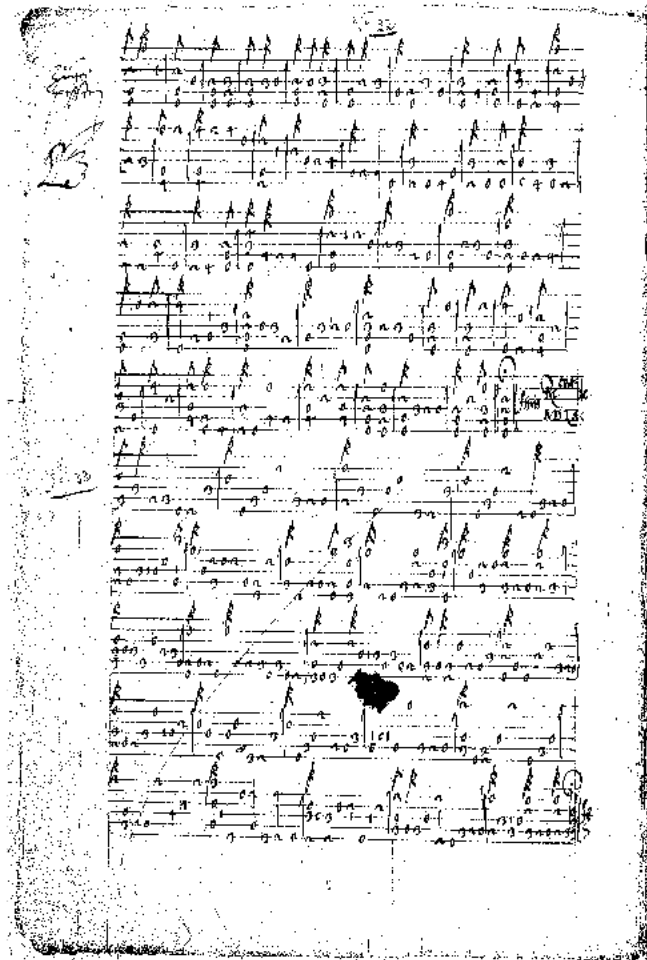


Figure 5 10 - Marco dall'Aquila's Recercar for lute (Martin changed a few notes in bar 20 to make it more compatible with the diatonic tuning of the kora)

My desire to explore how the kora could effectively accompany this style of piece and playing led to a staged compositional approach. First, I recorded the piece in the studio, ensuring a bright enough capture through the use of a Schoepps microphone pointed at the neck of the lute. I began writing my part by attempting to follow the piece’s movement respectfully. Once I was able to follow the piece, I began implementing my improvisational practice of *birimintingo* lines

and runs, often settling on descending runs particularly from the high F that created a lovely gestural interaction with the lute piece reminiscent of church bells at a wedding. I felt that this approach was effective in assuming balance in authoritative, complementary practice, allowing the lute to lead the piece and then during those sections making bolder gestures using the technique discussed. This duet created an interesting learning outcome in that it was a more submissive practice, following the lute piece as my father played it, and selecting carefully those parts where I felt I could take the lead and introduce more typical kora sonorities into the piece. The duets required a more intricate understanding of when to lead in accompaniment, and when to follow to create the most pleasing compositional outcomes.



Figure 5 11 - A photograph of the recording taken in the booth in Studio 1 at Salford University, used to attempt a clean capture using a combination of an AKG C414 microphone for the body and a Schoepps pencil microphone for the neck of the instrument

CHAPTER 6

The Key Outcomes of my Kora Practice

Interestingly, my intended approach to incorporating the kora as a creative tool into my compositional practice has actually resulted in more respect for the tradition of the instrument and thus more 'compliance' than I had intended. This is likely due to the way that I have been taught - I have not picked up this instrument and approached it so much as a studio composer looking for new tools and textures to use within compositions as I had expected to. It seems that I have not only more traditionally approached the instrument as a student of knowledgeable teachers of the kora, but also learned a great deal about the West African culture that created it. It is apparent that I have become attached to the kora, the culture and the history of the instrument as well as the people that I have met along the journey. This seems to have cultivated a deeply rooted respect for the instrument used and perceived in a more traditional role and way.

During this project, however, I feel that I have succeeded in extensive experimentation in composition and accompaniment through incorporating the kora into my digital workspace to use as a tool in my studio compositional repertoire. That said, it is clear that it is the traditional setting and stylism of this instrument that attracts me most. Even in the most experimental, contemporary music settings; an element of its history, its culture or my perceived placement informs to some degree my creative decision making during the studio compositional process. It is that kora sound palette that I have found to be such an effective tool in that it offers a unique set of tools and textures which could help in the creation of defined identity within dance music spaces. The traditional and crucial connections of kora music to dancing and to rhythm in West African culture have proven to be not just applicable to electronic dance music but a highly effective textural element in my studio compositions. The kora's timbre lends itself well to experimental signal processing such as time-stretching and the experimental work carried out during this project have revealed various techniques of manipulating kora material within my digital workspace that I feel could actually form part of my signature sound as a dance music producer.

Studio composer or Ethnomusicologist?

It is a crucial aspect to my ethnomusicological journey that I must try to navigate my own approach to my perceptions of the instrument and explore my original intention to develop its

use in my studio compositional process. This could involve treating it as the increasingly globalised instrument that it has become and to use it in creative and novel ways that attempt to further break the mould, that has been created by the guidance and tutelage that I have experienced thus far. This practice has forced me to consider my identity in not just the kora space, but in the dance music spaces that dominate my studio compositional repertoire and the boundaries, in my mind, of respectful experimentation within the space. Blacking's thoughts on musical change and the relationships between innovation within a flexible system and radical change have enabled me to place myself and my identity actually as the latter. In my mind, I consider my identity as a studio composer and my intentions operating within the space as respectful in the traditional sense, with simultaneously experimental work in other fairly unrelated spaces, cause me to feel that my work is not likely to be damaging towards ideas of purism and respecting tradition as it was, but actually seem to have helped to cultivate a greater understanding of those elements within the spaces in which I have operated and in the peer groups involved.

The kora's emergence and continued growth around the world music scene have created a flexible system where innovations are practiced and perpetuated, commonly by kora practitioners and even the jelis themselves through the adaptive use of technologies in their instruments and the use of effects, their varied accompaniment and experimentation with musicians from an array of styles and their open-mindedness towards innovation within the space. I have decided to develop my technique further, through regular tuition, learning traditional songs and practicing with the ensembles into the future to further aid my attempts to incorporate the kora into my studio compositional repertoire.

Furthermore, I will learn to read western notation on the instrument at a reasonable speed and develop a strategy for communicating kora parts effectively. This will aid in compositional process, my ability to provide accompaniment and to function in various ensemble settings.

My inability to use notational texts presented to me during accompaniment situations can partly be attributed to their unsuitability to my instrument due to the kora's unusual technique and stylism, leading me to believe that I would be able to create more effective kora parts myself through my greater understanding of the kora, its sonorities and its note range. Through this

knowledge I will also be able to make tuning decisions in accompaniment of both ensemble and studio composition type situations and so free my full note range and creativity in this regard.

In summary, I have become both through these studies and my passion for kora music and further implementation of the kora sonorities that I find so fulfilling into my studio compositional repertoire will certainly continue into the future, as well as my respectful, more traditional practice. The successful incorporation of my kora practice into my dance music output utilising techniques and skills learned through experimental and ensemble practice further reinforce this learning outcome and ensure that further experimentation within the dance music space is not just a possibility but now a planned outcome as a result of these studies.

Appendix

Kora Workshop Enculturation Week 2 Diary

The first song that we learned was ‘Kelefa ba’, the song praising the adventures of the great King Kelefa Sane who was a Mandinka warlord. Learning this song led to discussions of slavery among group as Adam Doughty revealed that these warlords were instrumental in the slave trade in Africa and this individual was no different. It was interesting to discover that praise songs on the kora could be in honour of such individuals with such negative attributes. It is easy to imagine the kora and its sound as a positive instrument with positive associations. It is considered by some jelis to be the first song composed on the kora. The learning method for the songs would take the form of slow demonstrations of *kumbengo* rhythms to start with. Over these basic rhythms we would gradually attempt to layer *birimintingo* melodies. Another notable outcome of this first day of practice was that several hours of kora practice with a complete stranger learning along with me resulted in a sense of friendly and co-operative learning and a relaxed atmosphere. This could suggest that co-operative group learning is a highly effective social icebreaker. Eventually after several hours of practice I noticed a reduction in practical function as I became tired and found it difficult to concentrate. This was a reminder that intensive musical instrument practice requires huge amounts of concentration and is very energy intensive. It can also be a frustrating process when making repetitive mistakes or forgetting how a melody line goes, as later in the evening when I found that I could not remember a small but crucial part of the song that we had learned. It was very satisfying when I worked it out again and found that I could play it.

The second song that we learned was ‘Jimbasengo’. ‘Jimba’ is supposed to be an imitation of *bins*, which are a sort of garment decoration, jingling on womens’ dresses when they dance, and an erotic style of piece. ‘Sengo’ is an ‘anglification’ of song and so it is basically the Jimba song. Adam Doughty and Kath Pickering did a joint performance demonstration of a song sung in Mandinka as a sort of impression of a woman they knew. This was a remarkable experience in that two English people had broken out, for the first time in my company, into song in an African language. I had never seen anyone do this before and it came as quite a shock. They seemed to have a reasonable understanding of what the words meant but it became apparent to me that very rarely does one see someone sing in another language to their mother tongue. This is quite possibly one of the most powerful examples of the globalisation of kora and indeed West African

music enabling people from the other side of the world to become so absorbed into their kora practice that it is possible to do something that remarkable. This led to discussions about the importance of singing in kora music, the importance of vocalization in the transmission of meaning and parallels like opera music where it is often in another language that the majority of the audience in England wouldn't understand. Even if the opera is sung in English it can be so focused on dramatic vocal techniques that it is so hard to understand that they often show subtitles. The idea that instrumental kora music had seen great success due to greater accessibility was also discussed and it seemed that the attempts to bring kora music to global audiences had changed the format somewhat. Indeed, there were revealed to be many different languages and dialects in West African music which leads to a lack of understanding within the 'local' kora culture in West Africa itself. An emotional moment arose where Adam Doughty revealed that a man from Senegal who he had considered to be a best friend had recently passed away with twenty-something children. He revealed a desire to provide his family with work and with rice at the Kora Workshop's Senegalese compound. This provided an interesting insight to the personal relationships made on ethnomusicological journeys and the potential for crossovers between your musical practice and your personal life.

The difficulty level rose when we began learning the less repetitive, more complex lines that accompanied the vocals on 'Kelefa Ba'. The song itself clearly presents ideas of strength and warfare; 'Jola Kele Badjura' – strong willed from Badjura, 'Tembo Bania' – his spear lies in Bania (the site of a famous battle). Incorporating new lines or melodies into the more basic parts that had been learned so far and attempting to create seamless transitions to and from new sections can often be particularly difficult in practice, partly as there often exists a disparity in tempo between what one can already play and what one is trying to learn. We were shown octave exercises which led onto a new part of 'Jumbasengo' which I found particularly tricky. It seemed to me that four planes of movement exist when playing complex parts – up and down on two sets of strings simultaneously. This makes the kora very challenging to play and particularly when one considers the possibility of a lower note existing higher up on the left set of the strings. I experimented making percussive sounds by hitting the handles and body of the kora along to the others playing. The handles made a satisfying bass drum sound while tapping the body created a sharper tonal 'slap' bongo type of sound. This was a useful discovery that I decided to try to incorporate into my compositions. I had some interesting thoughts about the relative learning

speeds of individuals in a collective learning environment like the small group lessons that were taking place and their effects on overall development of practice and the speed at which that takes place. I found that my fellow student and I were quite inconsistent in how fast we picked up new lines on the kora and one would often ‘get it’ before the other. The overall pace was relatively constrained in our case by the speed of the slowest learner at that time, though the person occupying that position was never the same person for long enough to warrant doing it any differently. I also found that I would struggle more at first but would return the next day playing it better than my learning companion and with greater memory recall, which made my greater frustration at first more manageable.

There was a discussion about the availability of materials for the construction of new instruments and Adam Doughty had revealed that his deer skins supplier was closing at the end of this year. This made me think about the availability of resources in kora construction – the calabashes and the wood were being imported from Africa into Europe because they originate from that geographical region, but it was possible to get the skins from more local sources. He was concerned about quality, however, as his previous supplier skinned the deer carefully by hand and this made for better skins for kora bodies. We began learning our 3rd song ‘Jarabi’ or ‘addiction’ in Mandinka – a traditional song originally sung in Bambara the Malian language at weddings and ceremonies, which I had learned from John on my *konso* kora, but interestingly it was not just different in terms of the tuning but the actual melody lines were played differently and while recognizable it was noticeably different. To play ‘Jarabi’ we had to sharpen our B flats to B naturals to what is known as ‘Suarta’ tuning, which didn’t take long using our machine head tuners but did mean that we would have to retune in order to return to practicing the first songs. It was remarkable how much of the songs we were learning relied upon octave harmony and I found myself learning the octaves quite quickly as a sort of secondary process and I began to notice the patterns of alternative left thumb and first right finger. A notable learning point was that of the importance of musical context – of what is played before and afterwards. I was really struggling to get my head around a riff until I realized it was being demonstrated from the last bar of the previous phrase. Once I identified the first beat of the melody, the context of the last part of the phrase before it made sense and suddenly, I was able to play it. ‘Jarabi’ had a Western medieval feeling to it that I couldn’t place and so I discussed it with Adam Doughty who suggested that it could be because pre-tempered keyboards there often existed a modal system -

the sharpened B flat created a Lydian mode. Due to gaps in intonation new keys started on different notes when composing – so a minor feel actually required a change in mode.

The fourth song that we began to learn was ‘Bani le’, meaning ‘Where’s Bani?’. Bani is an old word for ancestors and so the song is looking for deceased persons as a sign of respect and demonstrating thinking of them and their achievements. It is also often adapted as a praise song as a demonstration that people are looking for these special individuals. This song I found quite tricky to learn due to commonalities as it was also in ‘Suarta’ tuning with the B notes naturalized and it began on the same chord and in a very similar way to Jarabi. It struck me that this must be a common occurrence on the kora in common tunings. due to the open tuning style. We discussed catch phrases that people say when they play the kora as I had noticed people exclaiming phrases over kora players on recordings and desired to understand the significance of this. Common phrases are as follows:

DUNEA – WORLD/EVERYBODY

ALLAH LA DUNEA A COLEATA – THIS LIFE IS DIFFICULT

NAMU – HEAR YOU / YEAH MAN

A TONEA – IT’S TRUE / SOUNDS RIGHT / THAT’S GOOD

A DEATA – IT’S TASTY (FOOD + MUSIC)

A BARIKA – THANK YOU

On the last day of my stay my intention was to better understand the organology of the kora and gain confidence in my ability to maintain my own instrument. Adam Doughty and I discussed his MIDI kora interface project and some of the technical difficulties involved in the project, such as the sensitivity of the string sensor and the miniaturisation of the MIDI box. We worked on an adaptation project being carried out for a customer with a *konso* kora desiring it to be replaced with a neck with machine heads. First the bent, rusty iron tailpiece was replaced with one of his steel tailpieces and a neck fitted with machine head tuners was fitted through the body of the calabash. He then demonstrated aligning the bridge and fitting the strings and then handed me the kora to string up and so I fitted the rest of the strings to this kora. Interestingly, though I did not make use of this shortcut, he had fitted a machine head tuner fitting to his drill allowing him to rapidly tune up instruments which I thought was an interesting technological adaptation and

application. I felt much more confident with my bridge and my strings on my instrument which removed these tangible barriers to incorporating the kora into my compositional practice.

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