

# Modern Griot

**Alexandra Petropoulos** speaks to Gambian *kora* player Sona Jobarteh about the musical journey that has taken her through traditional *griot* music and Western classical performance, and how it led to the creation of her country's first school dedicated to Mande music

**S**unjata Keita watches regally over the proceedings, his marvellously patterned robes drape over his kingly red throne. He has just been crowned the king of the Mali Empire, and although Sanjally, the boy playing Sunjata, is only nine years old, he exudes a charisma fit for an emperor. The other children, his subjects, dance and sing his praises, grinning from ear to ear, while another young actor, Sidiki, plays the *balafon* at the base of Sunjata's throne. It is clear they are relishing this moment, proud to be showing off their hard work. They finish triumphantly and take their bows. The audience, made up of parents, teachers and a few members of the Gambian ministry, offer up their proud applause.

The children are students at the brand new Amadu Bansang Jobarteh School of Music in Brikama, the Gambia, set up by *kora* player Sona Jobarteh in memory of her grandfather. They have been at the school for less than a full month, and their performance is an impressive start for the school, one that promises much for the children who might otherwise have been left behind in a damaged national education system.

Education is a subject close to Sona Jobarteh's heart. Between her years of touring and performing, she has developed a comprehensive curriculum for teaching *kora*, and she has now embarked on her ambitious ABJ Music School project. Not only does the school represent the Gambia's first Mande music institution, Sona is working on a rigorous curriculum, which would ensure that the school is a respected cultural institution that is recognised internationally as well as at home.

Education has always played an important part of Sona's illustrious musical career. She was born for music, just one in a great line of *griot* musicians: her grandfather and namesake of the school was the Gambia's most celebrated *kora* player; her cousin is none other than Toumani Diabaté; her father Sanjally Jobarteh is a respected *kora* player; and her brother Tunde Jegede is a composer and accomplished *kora* and cello player.

As befitting a musician with her heritage, she began learning the *kora* from her brother at the tender age of two. Her brother also taught her classical instruments, like the cello, setting her on a path into the Western classical discipline. It wasn't long before the cello, which required so much of her practice time, replaced the *kora* as her dominant instrument. By the age of 11 she was enrolled at London's Royal College of Music's Junior Department studying the cello, piano, harpsichord and Baroque music, and soon after that she started full-time at the Purcell School of Music, where she added composition to her studies. "It was the first time I was allowed to bring in my

African heritage and bridge that gap." While her composition tutor encouraged this melding of cultures, it was certainly not the overriding sentiment of the school.

The fact that Sona's mother is English did little to dispel the discrimination that seemed inherent in the classical world. "The harsh reality is that I spent a lot of those years struggling with the fact I was not European. I was the only person who wasn't European. It was like I was just ticking a box for them. But the comments..." she trails off, seemingly lost to her memories, but only for a moment. "It was comments like, 'you're doing quite well for an African.' It's interesting that you get used to it when you're young, you don't criticise things. It's when you get older that you think, why did I put up with that stuff?"

She internalised that discrimination and quickly became self-conscious of her *griot* heritage, which may be why it took her a bit longer to find her way back to her roots, but "because of those experiences, I eventually came to a point where I decided I'd had enough. I wanted to pursue what I felt passionate about."

That pursuit took her on a journey that saw her experiment with various genres, but ultimately the beckoning whispers of her heritage led her feet back to that familiar, traditional path. "I was very apprehensive about choosing a traditional route when based in London. I felt like no one was going to understand what I was doing. Then I was like I don't care if no one understands, it's the only thing that just makes me feel everything that I want. So that's why *Fasiya* came about."

*Fasiya* (Heritage), Sona's debut album, was released in 2011, and saw her glorious return to Mande music but as informed by her Western training – new sprouts on those strong, deep roots. While she had decided to make the album without worrying about its reception, it was hard for her to be free of all apprehension, so it came as a pleasant surprise when it was so well-received. "There was a massive audience out there for this kind of music, and people loved it. It blew me away. And then within that year, I was the opening act for Toumani and Salif Keita... It made me confident that I had made the right choice."

Sona is the first female *kora* virtuoso, rising to prominence in a male-dominated tradition, but it may be thanks to her mixed heritage – the very thing that held her back in the classical world – that she was able to do so. "[Being a woman] wasn't as much of a problem as it should have been, and the reason was because I was different. It's the challenge you face having mixed parentage – you're always different, on both sides. But that was probably the reason why I was able to [play the *kora*]. I can't imagine being able to do it otherwise." ▶



The gender question has never sat well with Sona however. “I never used to want to talk about the fact I was female. I am a kora player, that’s it. It has nothing to do with being female.” Over the years she has learned to embrace the conversation, as she recognises that there are plenty of women who may take inspiration from it, but this does lead her into fascinating discussion on gender and how it affects musicality. “If someone hears me play, they wouldn’t know that it was a female playing.” What is the difference between a man and woman’s playing, I ask. “There are differences in energy, feel and touch. Music is very connected to the differences between men and women.”

This begs the question of whether she tried to learn to play like a man. “No, I just played how I wanted to hear myself playing. The only people that play the instrument are men, so I didn’t want to sound any different from what I believe the kora should sound like. That male/female energy thing is really important in my understanding of music. Particularly when it comes to people asking about a male tradition. I have never intended to change tradition. It’s about respecting what the tradition needs. So if you are a female and you want to embody the way that this music is, you really have to submit yourself to what it demands. It may mean embodying a different energy and a different kind of a spirit.” It is for these reasons she refuses to sing and play at the same time when recording. “The only realm that I embody femininity is when I sing.”

Singing seemed to sneak up on her. She never saw herself as a singer. It was while she was looking for a singer for *Fasiya* that fellow Gambian musician Juldeh Camara heard her singing and asked why she didn’t just sing. “I was like ‘Come on, let’s not be ridiculous, I am not a singer.’ But he was adamant: ‘Is something



wrong with you? Why would you spend six months trying to get someone to sing like that when you can just do it?”

But she did spend about six months trying to find a singer before admitting to herself that she was perfectly capable of singing. Since then, her singing career had led her to work with film composer Alex Heffes on several projects including *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* and a forthcoming remake of the TV series *Roots*. And never one to sit still, she is also in the midst of finishing a second album, due out this summer, and is still touring the world. However, recently, she’s put the most energy into the Amadu Bansang Jobarteh School of Music.

The school has been a long time coming, as the initial inspiration came to Sona when she was just 16 years old. She volunteered to assist in a music workshop for teenagers with behavioural problems. At this particular workshop, there was an angry young boy who had recently broken his hand by ▶

Students at the ABJ School of Music act out scenes from the *Epic of Sunjata*

punching a wall the day before, and Sona watched this boy find a moment of escape while drumming. “He beat that drum like there was no tomorrow. He was just completely stuck on hitting this thing. He seemed to realise he could hit something, and instead of always being a negative thing that happened, like breaking his hand or injuring someone, he was getting a positive response. He was the last to leave. When he finally put the drum down, he just left his hand on it for a moment, and that really moved me. That was when I realised I want to work with children. That seed had been planted: I am going to set up an educational institution one day, for children, but in Africa.”

The ABJ School of Music is the result. While Sona points out that the official mission of the school is to preserve and propagate Gambian culture, the fact that she is personally sponsoring the school’s first round of 15 students from her own pocket hints at the lasting desire to help children in need that workshop so many years ago seemed to have instilled in her.

Sona chose the students through workshops she conducted across the country. She was looking for students with a musical spark and ability, without regard to their affluence. “The last thing I wanted to do is segregate children, I am not having that. The majority of people in this country don’t have money to go to school, so going for the 5% that do, it’s not real. I have to at least reflect this country properly.”

While the school’s main focus is obviously music, Sona has developed a fully integrated, holistic curriculum that attempts to make up for an otherwise broken national education system. Studies are topic based, rather than subject based, meaning that while the students learn about the *Epic of Sunjata*, they have history lessons about the time of the Mali Empire, will write summaries of the story for their English comprehension, depict the story in their art lessons, sing songs about Sunjata, and, of course, perform scenes from the epic in their play.

Children are able to learn about their culture in a context of something they can understand, but Sona is not only concerned with cultural preservation, but also cultural representation. “Culture is rarely presented properly from Africa to the rest of the world. Compare it to Indian classical music and how they present it to the rest of the world; it’s got such a high level of dignity. Before they know anything about it, people already know that there’s a lot of substance to it. Whereas here, because the culture isn’t presented properly, people come with a different attitude, like let’s have fun. This is real and not a joke.”

That is why Sona is keen to construct a strict curriculum

that will help students learn music in a structured way that would reflect the classical institutions of the West, but be focused around proper representation of African traditional music and the musical framework behind it. “I am looking to get this implemented in every school in the country as an actual curriculum.

There’s no point if it’s only a few children are going to benefit from it.” But Sona has set her sights further afield than the local Gambian educational system. A curriculum like this would also benefit the international students that the school will soon start accepting. These students who come to study the kora, balafon, *djembe* or singing will not only help the school’s international recognition, but their fees would help Sona accept the next intake of Gambian students.

“Everything has a beginning,” Sona says with a satisfied sigh, deservingly allowing herself a moment to relish the result of her hard work. “It’s not even been a month, and I think we’ve come far. If we continue to develop at this rate, we will get there.” ♦

+ **TOUR** Sona Jobarteh will tour the UK this June, including performances at Africa Oyé and Glastonbury Festival. See Sona’s website for full tour details, [www.sonajobarteh.com](http://www.sonajobarteh.com)

+ **ONLINE** [www.abjschool.org](http://www.abjschool.org)

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