

Konono's medicine for the mind

The Congolese group has progressed from playing at funerals to big music festivals

JANE CORNWELL

STANDING onstage in a flat cap and blue puffa jacket, Augustin Makuntima Mawangu stares impassively at the party crowd in front of him as he holds his toy-like likembe, a metal thumb piano.

To his left musicians on drums, percussion, vocals and other electric likembes are grooving to their own insistent rhythms, which layer and loop to trance-like effect. Mawangu is immobile, as if addicted to the noise, or like a man possessed.

It's a long way from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo to this open-air festival in Hackney, east London, where Augustin's group Konono No 1 feature on a bill tailor-made for the capital's hipsters.

Back home concerts by Konono start around 7pm and last until morning. Here the six-strong touring outfit — Konono's acclaimed 2004 debut *Congotronics* and last year's *Assume Crash Position* boast a far more extensive line-up — have been allocated an hour, maybe 90 minutes, tops.

"Of course our music is different when we play all night," the 54-year-old Mawangu says later, his heavily accented French translated for me by Konono's Paris-born manager-producer Michel Winter. "But we have learned to manage our energy in such a way that we give our utmost even during very short performances, on television for instance. The reaction is always positive."

After touring Europe for years — and having recently conquered America and Japan — Konono know exactly what their brand of amped-up traditional trance music does to international audiences. All around me twentysomethings with creative hairstyles are dancing with blissful abandonment, transported by the ping-pong, tumbling sounds of the likembe and the beat of hand-tooled drums. By voices calling and responding and whistles trilling, samba-style; by the rat-a-tat of scrap metal and the fizz and buzz of deliberate sonic distortion. Beloved of everyone from Bjork to Herbie Hancock (both recent collaborators), Konono No 1 stumbled on their sound by accident about 45 years ago. Back then, and up until 2008, the group was helmed by Mawangu's father Mingiedi Mawangu, now 82, an ex-truck driver who passed his clothes sense and likembe prowess on to his second son.

A member of the Bazombo people from the Bas Congo province in the country's mountainous southwest, Mingiedi moved to Kinshasa in 1949, back when it was still called Leopoldville. Having learned percussive patterns and repetitive tone cycles from his own bandleader father, Mingiedi



When at home in Kinshasa Konono No 1's concerts usually begin around 7pm and last until morning

'My father took the ancient rhythms our ancestors once played on ivory horns and adapted them for the likembe'

AUGUSTIN MAKUNTIMA MAWANGU

founded an orchestra that went on to play weddings and funerals and the occasional outdoor cafe, while serving as a school for likembe players. Their instruments were acoustic, fashioned by Mingiedi from bamboo.

"My father took the ancient rhythms our ancestors once played on ivory horns and adapted them for the likembe," says Mawangu, an erstwhile electrician and father of seven (with his two wives), once Konono No 1 are offstage. "But Kinshasa grew so big and noisy that the sound didn't carry well. So in the mid 1960s he went looking for ways to amplify them."

With the resourcefulness endemic to most inhabitants of war-scarred Kinshasa, Mingiedi trawled the city's junkyards. He made

pick-up microphones from car alternator magnets and wires found in bins, then blasted the results through the bugle-shaped lance speakers left behind by Belgian colonists in 1960.

He renamed his orchestra Konono, a word that describes the stiffness of the body after death (in keeping with their presence at mourning ceremonies). When graduating likembe players went on to form their own Kononos, Mingiedi's group became known as Konono No 1.

Mawangu is telling me all this as we swelter in a fake flower-bedecked 1950s campervan parked in the festival's VIP area. A nearby DJ is playing music so loudly we've had to wind the windows up. While Mawangu is non-plussed, the other members of Konono — including vocalist Pauline Mbuka Nsiala, the collective's only woman — slump silently on couches, eyeing a group of dancing VIPs that includes flame-haired Florence Welch from Brit rockers Florence and the Machine and waiting for us to finish so they can get the hell out.

Elsewhere, on another stage, another crowd is gearing up to see John Cale, the Welsh-horn singer/songwriter and co-founder with

Lou Reed of legendary American avant-gardists the Velvet Underground — a band with whom Konono is often compared. Does Mawangu know their music? "No." He blinks, his gaze steady.

What of Can, Lee Perry or any of the other sonic experimentalists Konono have also been likened to? What of punk, whose DIY aesthetic dovetails neatly with Konono's? Mawangu shakes his head. "We don't compare what we do. We do our own thing."

As much as they enjoy collaborating, it's up to others to seek them out: Bjork invited Konono to perform on a track on her 2007 album *Volta*. Jazz pianist Hancock asked the band to join his A-list guests on last year's Grammy-nominated *The Imagine Project*. "They were both nice but we only met them briefly," says Mawangu, who seems more impressed by the left-field indie acts — Deerhoof, Shackleton, Animal Collective — that Konono worked with on last year's *Tradi-Mods v Rockers* album and ensuing concert series.

Dreamed up by Konono's Belgian record label Crammed Discs, home to other Congolese acts Staff Benda Bilili and Kasai Masai Allstars (who also fea-

tured), the project saw Congolese and indie artists from six countries swapping files and forging a new musical dialogue. It also breathed new life into Konono's open-ended sound. For despite the wisdom, advice and comfort meted out by their mainly Lingala-language lyrics, Konono gigs can sometimes feel like one very long — albeit very good — song.

The group's success has sur-

prised many Congolese, who tend to view it as folkloric relics from another era. As indeed it is: Konono's longevity stems in part from the "national authenticity" program implemented by president Mobutu in the mid 1970s, when the DCR — as Zaire — was isolated from the world (until his fall in 1997). Foreign music was banned. Konono were buoyed by government money. Mingiedi even had his own likembe slot on Zairean radio. Mawangu won't and can't talk politics. "He has to go back to Kinshasa," Winter says. "They all do."

When Crammed Discs was looking for Konono No 1 in 2002, it found them eking out a living along with numerous other community groups: "When we play funerals," Mawangu says, "our music is a medicine for the mind. It helps people swallow their grief. It wipes the slate clean."

Though the eventual success of Konono's debut album spawned a whole new genre (Crammed's ensuing *Congotronics* series is devoted to Kinshasa's electro-traditional bands), the West took a bit of convincing as well. Some world music critics, with bitter-sweet irony, deemed Konono and their distortion pedals and crackly speakers not authentic enough.

The rock and electronic music press, however, loved them. Konono No 1 became a cult hit, and the doors of the world flew open. Mingiedi, then Mawangu, kept his passport and money safe inside his puffa jacket, which he rarely ever took off ("It'll be the same in Australia," says Winter with a smile, "no matter how hot it is.") But they have taken success in their stride.

So are Konono No 1 looking forward to making their Australian debut? "Yes," says Mawangu, before admitting that he isn't quite sure where our country is. "Wherever we play I am transported to the spirits of my ancestors," he adds with a rare smile. "And people always dance. These are the most important things."

Konono No 1 plays at the Melbourne Festival, October 21, and Earth Station Festival, Adelaide, October 23.

Former child prodigy lets down his guard

Evgeny Kissin does not appear too comfortable in public

MATTHEW WESTWOOD

TRACKING down Evgeny Kissin was a tough assignment. The concert pianist — one of the true titans of the keyboard — was giving a few concerts in Europe during the northern summer, including at the Verbier Festival. This star-studded classical music festival in the Swiss Alps was founded in 1994 and Kissin has been there every year but two.

My task, ahead of Kissin's first Australian tour next month, was to travel to Switzerland and meet him there. Well, someone had to do it.

Conditions were attached. While several profile pieces have been written — including an excellent one in *The New Yorker* from 1996 — and documentaries made, he does not give many interviews. Word was that he had been burned by some experiences in the past.

One of the conditions was that the interview not happen until after his final concert in Verbier. The timing meant I would miss his Liszt recital program, which he is bringing first to Brisbane and then to Sydney, but I would get to see him in a concert called *Verbier Festival Celebrates*. It was unlike anything your correspondent has seen.

Among the stellar line-up: violinists Anne-Sophie Mutter and Joshua Bell, cellists Mischa Maisky and Gautier Capuçon, pianists Kathia Buniatishvili, Yuja Wang and Martha Argerich. And Kissin.

He and Argerich came on at the end to perform a cracking two-piano work by Lutoslawski, the *Paganini Variations*. Rarely could you hope to see such a bravura display, and fair enough that Kissin would want to wait until after his concert commitments before sitting down to an interview.

The other condition was that he wanted to approve the quotes attributed to him before the story was published. I took the prudent



F. BROEDE

Keyboard titan Evgeny Kissin

course and sent him an almost complete transcript of our hour-long conversation. He made only two small changes, and was extremely courteous in answering follow-up questions.

Everyone wants to know: what is he like?

Kissin is an unusual person. A former child prodigy — he turns 40 in October — he has lived the life of a concert pianist since his debut with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra at age 12. He still lives with his family and with his teacher, Anna Kantor, with whom he has studied since he was six, and whom he now regards as his mentor.

He does not appear the most comfortable person in public, although he says he has overcome the shyness of his early 20s. In conversation, he was polite to the point of formality.

But when we both relaxed, he opened up about his experiences as a child prodigy and about his life in music.

He is looking forward to his first Australian visit at the invitation of his friend Vladimir Ashkenazy.

"We're going to do Chopin's first and Grieg's concerto," he says of his concerts with Ashkenazy and the Sydney Symphony. "So he invited me and I was very happy."

In Review tomorrow: Matthew Westwood's interview with Evgeny Kissin

Architecture sector mourns a trio of its finest

A road crash near Darwin claimed the lives of three stars of urban design

PHIL HARRIS

WHAT were we all doing that morning? Two young Darwin architects, Greg McNamara and Lena Yali, husband-and-wife directors of Troppo Architects; myself, co-founder of that practice, now based in Adelaide; and Kevin Taylor of Taylor Cullity Lethlean, an eminent landscape architect renowned for succinct urban design.

It had been a fantastic week that began and ended by discussing the prospect of a competition for a new sustainable tropical city on the mangrove forest edge of Darwin harbour. How could we produce a city with the smallest footprint, linking with transport, with a true connection to its extreme tidal site, and one that responded to the divergent wet-and-dry season characteristics?

In between was time spent in the huge landscapes and hidden river oases of the Kimberley, where, together with an environmental scientist, an interpretive designer and a local eco-tourism guru, we were formulating a wilderness park master plan that would preserve the country while accommodating visitation in discrete precincts and remote swag-based campsites. How does an architect improve on the swag? What can a landscape architect draw that would be relevant for 405,000 hectares of Kimberley wilderness? How can the echoes of ancient storylines resound in the minds of 21st-century city dwellers?

In Australia, especially since



Kevin Taylor



Yali and McNamara

Glenn Murcutt won the 2002 Pritzker Prize (effectively, the Nobel Prize of architecture), the world has taken notice of the original character of our work. TCL's Australia Garden in Cranbourne, Victoria, rewrote the notion of landscape interpretation here.

But architecture and landscape architecture is only beginning to express its Australian-ness, and we still have yet to wholly incorporate an Aboriginal sensibility in our work. Big Bill Neidjie ("Kakadu Man") would say we are yet to hold a real "feeling" for country, one that reverberates with a sense of ecological connection between all creatures, the earth and landscape, and the seasons that check our progress through life. But there have been champions.

Against bureaucratic odds McNamara and Yali's work pared back shelter to the most minimal. Their techniques were old yet new — pivoting and broad sliding doors, shutters and louvers — all detailed with invention, set to whimsical angles and particular locations for best effect to capture special site connections and to maximise sheltered cross venti-

lation. They embellished these shelters with Top End timbers gathered directly from the source: sometimes left raw, other times polished but always shaped and layered to provide a unique patterning.

These patternings are reminiscent of the tropical savannah with its straggly eucalypts and spiky pandanus, also echoing the techniques of the Top End's raak painting. They applied local laterite to concrete toppings, interpreted indigenous weaving techniques and drew patterns from local flora and the beauty of the Arafura Sea. This was also expressed in shelters in the public domain, including the Grand Veranda at the Darwin Entertainment Centre forecourt, and in Darwin's Smith St Mall and Rain-tree Park rework. They took the Troppo practice, which Adrian Welke and I started in 1980, to a new level. Their recent work, acclaimed in the Territory AIA Architecture Awards, is likely to also be honoured in the National Architectural Awards later this year.

Kevin Taylor and Kate Cullity began the landscape and urban

design practice known as Taylor Cullity Lethlean in 1990. The practice completed the elegant Geelong waterfront redevelopment, and at the other extreme, the Uluru Cultural Centre landscape work. Since then, it has been awarded some of the most important public space commissions in Australia. As well as Australian Garden, these include the Manly Corso redevelopment in Sydney, Tarnanyanga (Victoria Square) and North Terrace redevelopments in Adelaide, the National Arboretum in Canberra, now in construction, plus masterplans for significant national parks. This body of work, led by Kevin, seems a natural fit with their place, as if they had always been there. You have to look twice to see the hand of man.

Beneath the obvious accomplishments of Greg, Lena and Kevin lay their ability to take community with them. Their work represents a profound conversation with their surrounds.

Few would argue that Taylor was Australia's greatest landscape architect. McNamara and Yali had taken Top End architectural expression to a new level. But I believe they represented, and will continue to represent, more than that.

When the world stopped for Greg, Lena and Kevin that Sunday morning, we lost three people closest to Big Bill's notion of "feeling", closest to bridging a gap in the national psyche. If there is an emerging architecture of reconciliation, we may have just lost some of its brightest proponents.

Lena Yali and Kevin Taylor died in a car accident on the outskirts of Darwin on August 8. Greg McNamara died in hospital three days later. Phil Harris walked away unharmed.

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