

Summer of Music

Jane Cornwell sets aside her inhibitions and tries her hand at Afro-Cuban *batá* drumming – just one of the musical courses on offer at the SOAS Summer Music School

Most campuses are quiet over the summer break: not SOAS, University of London. Over June and July the corridors of the School of Oriental and African Studies – the only higher education institution in Europe that specialises in the study of Asia, Africa and the Near and Middle East – thrum with the sound of music from, well, everywhere.

From a lecture room comes the melodic plinking of *mbira*, the thumb pianos of Zimbabwe's Shona people. From another, distinctive chanting that can only be *joik*, the song style of the Nordic Sámi people. There is *chachachá* by a Cuban big band; the stick-driven boom of Senegalese *sabar* drums; the buzz of the single-stringed Afro-Brazilian *berimbau* and a warm-up by those enrolled in classical Indian singing. At the famous SOAS World Music Summer School all the world's music seems to burst into bloom at once.

Established 15 years ago with the aim of showcasing the musical and cultural riches that exist within the SOAS Music Department, the Summer School has flourished and grown into an annual programme of 20 courses helmed by experienced teachers, each widely acknowledged as a specialist in their field. Most courses are five days (evenings). Some, such as World Music in the Classroom, a curriculum-development course for schoolteachers, are one day; others, including TaKeTiNa – a unique musical group process for activating musical and human potential through rhythm – span a weekend.

Students come from all walks of life, according to Katerina Pavlakis, an ethnomusicologist and music promoter who programmed and managed the school from 2006 to 2016. "It's a very diverse mix," she says. "There are professional musicians who want to explore a different instrument, people who have fallen in love with an instrument or musical culture while travelling, music students who want to further their studies, and people with no previous experience of playing music. Then there are the fans and existing students of the teachers themselves."

Last summer this journalist took part in Afro-Cuban *Batá* Drumming & Orisha Songs as taught by Adé Egun Crispin Robinson, a percussionist who has lent his skills to big name acts such as Soul II Soul and Brian Eno, and he is a *babalawo* (Santería priest) who has been playing the *batá* for over two decades. Blessed with a knack for communicating his passion for *batá* along with the key principles that animate the music, Robinson gave a taste of Afro-Cuban culture through the

songs played for the *orishas* (the Santería deities) in Cuba and elsewhere on a daily basis, and had us drumming and chanting right from the get-go.

After some self-consciousness, the singing aspect, for this non-singer, flowed easily and felt liberating. No matter that I spectacularly failed to hit all the notes; the taking part, the lifting up, was what mattered. With the Yoruba words to each chant written on a white board in green text, we each sang a line or three ("Now you!" Robinson would say, pointing), before they were rubbed off; we quickly learned to commit them to memory. At their base, the hourglass-shaped *batá* drums – Okénkolo (high), Itotéle (middle), Iyá (bass) – allegedly the favoured ensemble of Shango, who was a living king of the 14th-century Oyo Empire in Yorubaland before being made a deity.

"These are sacred songs that are meant to be sung in traditional settings by whole communities," says Robinson. "Part of the power of this music comes from people letting go, singing out strong and losing themselves in the safety and harmony of the larger group. It's very life affirming. Every year my students report the same thing."

A gifted performer and the descendent of a long line of *griots* from the south of Senegal, Kadialy Kouyaté also teaches his instrument – the 21-string Mandinka *kora* – by ear, in what is





Courses include Middle Eastern Percussion, Circle Singing, Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming & Orisha Songs and Middle Eastern Maqam Ensemble



billed as a 'taster course for beginners.' Learning the kora is one of the most popular courses on the syllabus: "The kora has become the darling instrument of world music, and SOAS is one of the most credible places to have that first experience," says Kadialy, who over the last decade has been mentored at SOAS by Dr Lucy Durán, an ethnomusicologist, BBC Radio host, Grammy-nominated record producer and pivotal figure in the UK's Cuban and West African music scenes. "Many of the people who do the course have already travelled to Mali, Senegal or the Gambia and been intrigued by the beautiful, trance-like melodies of the kora," he continues. "Others know it from albums and concerts. There are always those who go on to buy their own instrument so they can keep on playing."

The reasons people sign up for Summer School classes are as varied as their demographic. There's the challenge of the new and, of course, the element of fun. There's the desire to push things further: "After the first course ten years ago people loved it so much they asked us to continue, and the SOAS Cuban big band, Orquesta Estelar, was born," says Dr Sara McGuinness, the pianist, sound recordist and bandleader behind acclaimed UK-based collective Grupo Lokito, and (with musicians Elpidio Caicedo and Jimmy Martinez) teacher of the popular Cuban Music Big Band course. "The band rehearses every Tuesday in term time and has a mix of students and non students with a wide range of skills. We put on a gig every month in Euston [at The Pack & Carriage pub] and it's always packed. I'm teaching

my annual big band course in Havana this year and many of the SOAS big band are coming with me," McGuinness adds. "I can't wait to show them the music."

Robinson recalls a batá student from Korea who returned to her office job and reported that she couldn't stop singing feel-good orisha songs at work, and a Greek student who went on to be initiated as a ceremonial drummer in Cuba and now heads the Pangea World Music Center in Athens. "The SOAS Summer School is a rare jewel among London's rich cultural offerings," he says. "Nowhere else can you be exposed to such a range of the world's music traditions with such a high standard of teaching."

Students leave the Summer School feeling enriched and inspired, continues Pavlakis. "You learn that what feels familiar can be approached differently; for example, that rhythms can be uneven, like in Balkan music, or run in long patterns like in Indian *tabla*, or that your voice has overtones with which you can sing two melodies at once, as in Mongolian *khöömii*."

For McGuinness, the Summer School programme creates a community of musicians, amateur and professional, and a buzz that embodies the SOAS spirit. "Joy," she says. "It brings a lot of joy to a lot of people." ♦

+ DATES This year's Summer School takes place from June 19-July 27, visit www.soas.ac.uk/summerschool for more details