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Toumani & Sidiki Diabaté © Youri Lenquette

Toumani & Sidiki Diabaté

Fri 30 May 7.30pm

Toumani Diabaté kora
Sidiki Diabaté kora

There will be no interval in this concert

Some quarter of a century ago a young Malian kora player named Toumani Diabaté played a concert in London with his late father, Sidiki, a musical virtuoso and one of the first kora players to perform outside West Africa. Tonight – and a Grammy award-winning international reputation later - Toumani is performing alongside his eldest son Sidiki, his grandfather's namesake, with who he's made a stunning album of instrumental kora duets.

The kora is synonymous with the name Diabaté, a dynasty that has transformed this 21-string harp, with its great gourd resonator, into the most iconic of African instruments. Toumani, 48, and Sidiki, 23, are but two generations of kora players in a lineage that stretches back several hundred years to the Mandé Empire, under which what was carved up by the French and British as Mali, Guinea, the Gambia and other West African countries were borderless, united.

Their ancestors, the hereditary caste of poets, musicians and historians known as *griots*, played for the elite, their kora cascades accompanying a vast repertoire of praise songs dedicated to kings, presidents and patrons. That the kora is now widely recognised as a lead solo instrument is largely down to Sidiki senior, who released the first ever kora album, *Mali: Ancient Strings*, in 1970.

Toumani took the baton, experimenting with technique and developing a style of playing that remained rooted in Malian tradition, but was open to collaboration with everything from jazz and flamenco to the music of the Icelandic singer, Björk. That his son has developed his own distinct sound was always inevitable: Sidiki is a social-media-using urban *griot*, hugely famous at home in Bamako as the *kora*-playing rapper in hip hop double act, Iba One.

'The *kora* is Africa's guitar or bass', Sidiki has said. 'We take the way of the previous generation and make something new with it'.

Mandé culture has it that sons are the rivals of their fathers, and must work hard to outdo them. Young Sidiki was taught to play *kora* by his mother and aunt, to ensure a playing style all his own: 'My son has my blessing', says Toumani, whose previous collaborators include Taj Mahal, Damon Albarn, the London Symphony Orchestra and his great friend, the late blues guitar hero Ali Farka Touré. 'I want him to be luckier than me'.

Toumani wasn't inevitably a prodigy. Sidiki senior was too busy being one of the most celebrated musicians of the early years of Mali's independence, very often away touring with Mali's National Instrumental Ensemble (which featured Toumani's mother, praise singer Nene Koita), to give his children a single *kora* lesson. Toumani picked up the *kora* at the age of five and taught himself, graduating from a seven-string *kora* to the 21-string instrument after years of intensive practice.

'I never went out at night', he says. 'I would play the *kora* until the early hours of the morning'.

After making his public debut aged thirteen to great local acclaim he began accompanying performances at weddings and baptisms and touring with great Malian divas including the inimitable Kandia Kouyaté. Later, having established an international reputation in 1986 with *Kaira*, an evocative solo debut he recorded in an afternoon, Toumani turned to jazz – and then turned home, intent on re-establishing the *kora* alongside other traditional Mandé instruments.

In 1999 he released *New Ancient Strings*, a collaboration with fellow *kora* master Ballake Sissoko, whose father Djelimady played on that original *Ancient Strings* album. Around about then the music of Mali – varied, compelling, everywhere – was beginning to make the West double take. As release followed release and Malian artists toured the world's festivals and concert halls, the *kora* maestro Toumani Diabaté was at their vanguard.

Toumani & Sidiki is his first *kora* album since 2008's *The Mandé Variations*, and is as much a protest record as it is a glittering dialogue between father and son, past and future. All but one of its ten pieces are traditional tunes, reinvigorated and renamed in the wake of the 2012 incursion of Islamic militants into Mali's north that saw music banned – and the chaotic coup in Bamako in the south which effectively closed down the city's nightlife.

Here, then, are songs dedicated to the people and places that stood up and stood out in Mali: 'Rachid Ouiguini', named after an Algerian historian, pacifist and music lover. 'Tijanyi' honours the peace-loving Sufi strain of Islam to which both Toumani and Sidiki subscribe. 'Tolerance is what's important', says Toumani. 'Islam came to Mali centuries ago, we don't need lessons'. 'Bansang' is for the town in Gambia where Sidiki senior came from, and where he learned the *kora*.

'We're not going backwards, trying to play just how my father and grandfather did these songs', says Toumani. 'We have to do it our way'.

The way of this father-and-son collaboration is one of history, travel, leaving and loss. It's a story of the journey of the *kora* between countries, from country to city. For Toumani Diabaté and Sidiki Diabaté are modern *griots*, with ancient magic in their fingers.

Prepare to be spellbound.

Programme notes © Jane Cornwell

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