



Andy Morgan

WORLDS APART, UNITED IN MUSIC

Their musical foundations could not be any more different but Catrin Finch and Seckou Keita thrive as a duo, writes **Jane Cornwell**

DBack in early 2000, as the century was turning, Catrin Finch was playing harp at Buckingham Palace, unaware that her future lay with a different sort of nobility altogether. The Welsh musician was the first person since 1873 to hold the post of court harpist, a tradition revived for the millennium by the royal family and a surprise honour for Finch, then a student at London's Royal Academy of Music.

"I felt like I was leading a double life," says Finch, now 39 and a leading exponent of this glis-sandi-glittering classical instrument. "Regularly over the four years I would put on my best dress, get in my crappy car, park and play music for some incredible people. Then I'd be home in time for a pint with my friends."

Around the same time the musician Seckou Keita had arrived in the UK from Casamance, a war-torn region below the Gambia in southern Senegal, West Africa. His instrument was the kora, the harp-lute played by the griot bards of Mandé culture, whose surnames are traditionally always Diabaté, Kouyaté and Cissokho, which is the family name of Keita's mother. Keita's father, a wandering holy man, was descended from Emperor Sundiata Keita, who founded the Malian empire in the 13th century, and whose lineage the griots are born to praise.

To be half griot and half Keita, then, is to be both poet and king.

"My earliest memories are of music," says 42-year-old Keita, who is also a master drummer. "My mother's father was one of the most respected griots in Senegal. Musicians from all over would come to his compound to play. I picked up a kora aged seven and learned by watching, practising, experimenting with tunings. Soon they were calling me 'Seckou the little griot'."

Finch and Keita were each pursuing thriving careers when they met by chance in 2012. Today they are hailed as one of the most popular world music duos of the decade. Recent accolades include Best Duo/Act at the 2019 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, where Keita was also awarded Musician of the Year. At the 2019 Songlines Music Awards Ceremony — held in Hackney, London, on November 30 — they won the Fusion category for their current second album, *SOAR*, a work lit by the theme of migration and bestowed with five-star reviews.

"Emotional, virtuosic, triumphantly bringing different cultures together," declared one critic. "As near to perfection as possible," swooned another.

Backstage at the Songlines, in a green room dotted with A-list world artists including Anglo-Indian sitarist Anoushka Shankar, Portuguese fado singer Mariza and Malian singer/guitarist Fatoumata Diawara, the platinum-haired Finch sits on a couch, award in hand, and grins. She has just performed onstage playing keyboards instead of harp, legacy of injuring her thumb in a car-boot a few days previously. The duo's telepathic musicality was obvious, nonetheless.

"This project began with no expectations," she says. "It was meant to be a one-off. We did our first recording (2013's *Clychau Dibon*), which led to a performance at (world music showcase)

WOMEX and two years' worth of live dates. It's just gone from strength to strength, really organically, which is brilliant."

The extroverted Keita — who is wearing a porkpie hat and a suit printed with skull-and-crossbones, bought from Camden Market for the occasion — joins us. Despite a background that variously involves collaborating with musicians from Cuba, Egypt and India, heading up a quartet featuring his sister, singer Binta Susso, and touring to more than 40 countries (including Australia) he says he'd never considered working with the classical harp until he met Finch.

"My impression of the harp wasn't positive." He shrugs, smiles. "I thought it was elitist and conservative, the stuff I might hear in the background on the radio. Plus the harp is chromatic and has more strings than the kora, and its



Gareth Griffiths

Seckou Keita and Catrin Finch, above, and performing on stage, left

rhythms are different. The harp is more straight, where the kora has more wiggle."

Neither had Finch given thought to the kora, an instrument with a long hardwood neck, goat-skin-covered gourd resonator and, usually, 21 strings, though Keita's kora, typical of the Casamance region, has one extra. "More rhythm and groove," says Keita, who recorded his 2015 solo album, *22 Strings*, in his basement at home in Nottingham, in England's Midlands, in a single take.

"The harp is almost like the national instrument of Wales," says Finch, who learned to play aged five then won every harp contest going, from her country's *Eisteddfodau* — annual music competitions and performances celebrating Welsh culture — to the prestigious Lily Laskin prize in France. "I was immersed in that whole classical realm. Debussy, Mozart, Ravel."

She performed alongside artists such as Bryn Terfel and Sir James Galway; recorded with orchestras including the Boston Pops and the

Royal Philharmonic; topped the classical charts with her 2008 take on Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and 2012's *Blessings*, in which the choral works of celebrated composer John Rutter were rearranged for harp and chamber orchestra.

In 2012 she also committed to a major collaborative tour with Malian kora maestro Toumani Diabaté, whose 2008 Grammy-nominated album, *Mande Variations*, had wooed the world with its shimmering, cascading rhythms.

When a military coup in Bamako, Mali's capital, prevented Diabaté from attending tour rehearsals, Keita was called in from Rome, where he'd been giving concerts to a UN delegation, to help prepare the repertoire with Finch. Their rapport was immediate. After Finch completed her tour with Diabaté (on which Keita featured) she and Keita recorded *Clychau Dibon* ("Cly-

work that takes its cue from the osprey, a bird of prey classified as vermin and persecuted to extinction in Wales during the 17th century. Almost 400 years later, thanks to the efforts of environmentalists, the osprey is once again nesting in the estuaries of mid-Wales, to where it makes its 4800km migration each year from the coast of Senegal.

This image of a soaring bird offers a neat metaphor for journeys both emotional and physical, and the duo's ongoing exploration of the parallels and differences between their two instruments and cultures.

"I like the bird's freedom to migrate to different places. Nothing stops them. They know where they're heading and where they'll find peace. I've been on the same journey but in a different way," says Keita, who was five when war broke out in Casamance, which now has an uneasy peace after decades of civil conflict.

"I remember the first time I heard the sound of a gun repeating, and my grandfather and uncles digging a hole for the women and children to hide in. We lay there all day until the shooting slowed and my grandmother got up because she wanted to smoke her pipe."

Tracks on *SOAR* include "Téranga Bah", a phrase meaning "great hospitality" in Wolof and Mandinka, both West African languages spoken by Keita, who repeatedly sings the words "Open the gate" as a paean to Senegal's neighbourly attitudes and a plea for the world to remember its manners.

A Finch composition, "Cofiwych Drywern" ("Remember Trywern [sic]"), laments the flooding of North Wales' Trywern Valley in 1965 to build a reservoir that supplied water to Liverpool in England, triggering a new wave of Welsh nationalism.

"Back then the Welsh language was disappearing fast," says Finch. "Welsh wasn't being taught in schools (it became compulsory in 1988), and then this happened and fuelled everybody's anger. It was an iconic moment."

Then there's "Bach to Baissa", a track that showcases the duo's respective influences and enchanting, life-affirming synergy by beginning with an extract from Bach's *Goldberg Variations* before daringly morphing into one of the oldest tunes in the Senegambian repertoire, complete with griot chants.

"I don't think Bach has been done before (on the kora)," Keita says. "The melody is fascinating, the way it goes around and around. I learned through Catrin."

Finch smiles. "Everything about what we are and the way we've joined together is about not having any borders or being boxed into a musical genre. I came from a world of study and grades and doing exams and competitions. Seckou comes from a world where music is a way of life that is passed down through generations, which was such an eye-opener for me."

They exchange a look. "We each let the other feel free," she says.

Catrin Finch & Seckou Keita play WOMAdeLaide on March 7 and 9.