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The Digital Recording as Digital Score:
Derek Gripper, Toumani Diabaté and Transcription Across Borders

During my interview with Derek Gripper, South African classical guitarist, composer, and acclaimed interpreter of Malian kora music, he spoke about an early technical misstep in his work transcribing the music of Toumani Diabaté. He was working out his first transcription of a cut from Diabaté's acclaimed 1987 record *Kaira*[1], a recording Gripper had admired and studied for over a decade. Gripper recalled that his method at that time consisted of transcribing via an excruciating vertical method, looping a two-second phrase, and figuring out all the interlocking notes before moving on to the next brief swath of audio. After painstakingly devoting a few months to making this initial transcription, it occurred to him finally to listen to the recording on headphones for the first time. Gripper recalls,

> I started the transcription literally note by note in time. You know, it wasn't like "ok there's the bass line," and write that out and work out the top line. I was literally working from left to right … discovering the music through that sort of slow motion photography kind of thing. And actually I did a transcription of "Jarabi" off my computer speakers; then I plugged it into headphones or something and then I was "Oh fuck, there's the BASS!... I hadn't even heard the bass line … And I still have this transcription; it's like "Debussy does the kora."[2]

Gripper's personal narrative strikes me as rich in a variety of registers, ranging from the mediating role of technology to differences in musical conception and practice. When I set out to interview Derek Gripper, I did so because I was primarily interested in ethical questions surrounding cross-cultural music borrowing/exchange/appropriation. What does

[1] Produced by ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán.
[2] Personal interview on 4/4/17.

it mean for a white South African guitarist to build a successful career performing note-by-note transcriptions of a great Malian kora player's music? I wondered what might be learned from his career about the politics of cross-cultural exchange: the terrain of a world music industry where international fame and resources are often more readily bestowed upon artists who translate another's musical tradition into a familiar context, rather than the inheritors of the tradition themselves. When I interviewed Gripper, I discovered someone who was thoughtful and excited to talk about these issues, as well as others that exceeded my initial lines of inquiry.

More specifically, I became very interested in the way Derek Gripper has come to think of recordings of the Mandé repertory (such as *Kaira*) as a new iteration of the musical score taking hold in West Africa. If we accept his premise that these recordings can be conceived of as musical scores, then we discover fertile ground for investigating the ways that recorded technology is shifting musical practice not only in "the West" but in West Africa as well. Furthermore, that premise shifts the way we think about someone like Derek Gripper, an artist who sees the work of interpreting the 'scores' of a composer such as Toumani Diabaté as an exciting and natural extension of his training as a classical guitarist, an interpreter of scores. Over the course of my interview with him I also learned that the process of cross-cultural learning undertaken by Gripper has made deep and lasting impacts on his practice as a performer.

Hearing Europe in Mali

Derek Gripper's website contains a wealth of prose concerning what drew him initially to begin his investigation of kora music, and how his thinking and approach has shifted over time. As a musician formed in the world of European classical music, much of Gripper's early views on the music of Toumani Diabaté began with an ontological

perspective rooted firmly in that tradition. He writes, "It is my feeling that the first seven scores of Toumani Diabaté's solo works, arranged as they are for solo guitar, give us first and foremost a glimpse into the music of one of our time's great composers, and certainly one of Africa's greatest composers." He continues, relating the music back to his primary musical world, "Equally interesting is the fact that they give us a glimpse of the kind of musical activity that may have resulted in some of the composers of Europe, the Bach's and Scarlatti's, who themselves were far closer to Toumani Diabaté's musical world than we are today."[3] Here, Gripper both acknowledges the immense value of Diabaté's musical work, while also drawing a corollary between a *contemporary* Malian artist and European composers of the 18th century. This equivalence plays into all too common tropes of African musical practice as stuck in a historicized past.

However, my discussion with Gripper made clear to me that his underlying point is related to the dissatisfaction he feels with the often rigid and stagnant performance practice of the European classical tradition.[4] The world of griot kora music opened new avenues of possibility to him. "Every time you play a piece of classical music you are playing into a sonic space that has been populated by thousands of people in exactly the same way, you know … We're operating in such a heavily rigidified space." He continued with his characteristic playful enthusiasm: classical "guitar recordings are just another world, and if you're in it, it makes sense. But once you've heard some freak on kora at 3 in the morning, high on tea and sugar, freaking out on a piece that you know and turning it into something completely different … then you … (trails off)."[5] Gripper reiterated repeatedly that the flexibility of interpretation in the griot kora music he studied made an indelible impact on his own

[3] See https://www.derekgripper.com/african-guitar/toumani-diabate/
[4] He went on to refer facetiously to classical performers as "neurotic racehorses" that need to be kept in a temperature-controlled room so that they can perform at the necessary level. Personal interview on 4/4/17.
[5] Personal interview on 4/4/17.

performance practice. He is now working on a recording of Bach compositions, hoping to translate the flexible spirit of interpretation that has inspired him into this realm classical music as well. He feels that this approach is more likely the type of approach that the likes of Scarlatti and Bach would have had in mind to begin with.

> I feel, and I could be completely wrong, that in Bach's time a score is like a recording is today for Toumani. I can't imagine that a guy like Bach played these pieces note for note, you know what I mean. He was all over the place, a crazy improviser … and that got slowly lost as people became more and more in awe of the composer, and you had this kind of cult of fame.[6]

What remained most clear through the interview was Gripper's immense appreciation for Diabaté's music. He follows in a long line of cross-cultural music makers seeking to expand their musical language and skills beyond what they readily encounter around them. He shared a theory during our conversation that can perhaps situate his own experience. "I have this sort of vague theory you know that the Colonial period really altered European music … There is this kind of change in the perception of self because suddenly you discover this other – the rest of the world – and you suddenly have to face yourself." Perhaps Gripper's desire for a musico-ontological shift was connected to his own experience in this regard. This would not be unlike the many "Western" musicians (myself included!) who have sought out "other" musical perspective outside our places of birth. However, what makes Gripper's story unique, and distinctly a product of this era, is the manner in which he has accessed this musical "other."

Sound Recordings as Digital Scores

By the time Gripper released *One Night on Earth: Music from the Strings of Mali* in 2012 he had still never been to West Africa.[7] His solo guitar album contains performances of his

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[6] Personal interview on 4/4/17.

[7] He relates this story in a 2015 Tedx presentation from Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD2I_Q9dkac

transcriptions of kora music from several great contemporary griots, including Diabaté. And it is a truly stunning work: gorgeous in detail, beautifully recorded, and filled with heartfelt and artful renderings of the arrangements created by the Malian artists who so deeply inspired Gripper. He made decisions to simplify the music at times so that it would fit more naturally on the guitar, and the effect is effortless and clear music.[8] Significantly, his process of transcribing (or "translating," as he likes to say) was facilitating solely by the existence of recorded sound objects. In contrast to the once more common apprenticeship model for cross-cultural musical learning, Gripper labored for many years over Diabaté's performances on the CD *Kaira;* eventually rendering them to the page, inventing new tunings that suited them on guitar, and landing four-fifths of Diabaté recordings on Gripper's own critically-praised album. All of this before setting a foot in West Africa, or studying with a kora player in person On the significance of recorded music Gripper said, "There was a big change in the meaning of recording from the old shellacs to the first piano rolls to, you know, the 78's, to the CD, and I think we really have to discover what this … free and proliferating dissemination of recordings means, in a positive sense, creatively."[9]

For Gripper this "free and proliferating dissemination" of music recordings has offered him an avenue for interpreting particular performances from aural tradition contexts as "digital scores," similar in function to the written scores that define the European classical music tradition. He makes reference to the proliferation of sixteenth-century Spanish *vihuela*

[8] Gripper described this as one of the fundamental rules he created for himself in transcribing, or "translating" this music for guitar: "There are always things you have to change. I've made that a basic rule – the music that exists on the page – it has to have two primary functions before anything else. It has to be really natural for my technique now; it has to really work for the instrument. Because without those you can't get that naturalness and spontaneity that will ultimately make the music sound authentic – or nice to listen to. And possibly also close to the original. And that's a funny paradox of translation: you can get all the notes on the guitar but it sounds totally stuck because on the guitar it's really hard … So in order to translate Scarlatti onto the guitar you've got to understand what the piano is saying in the piano's world and how to translate that into the guitar's world, and that's really the only way it's going to be successful [rather] than just a bad copy of the original, which of course is going to sound better on the original instrument. So I really approach it as a translation." Personal interview on 4/4/17.

[9] Personal interview on 4/4/17.

tablatures, which were widely and popularly disseminated across Europe, as a forerunner to this era's abundance of recorded sound "scores." Gripper writes,

> For the first time kora music was heard in a way similar to the old vihuela scores, or Bach's music. So there are now "scores" of kora music in the form of recordings of the actual sound of individual performers: Digital Scores. The possibilities of these scores are not as subtle and diverse as the scores of 500 years ago—the manuscript scores of the "composers" of Europe—but these new scores can be turned into music in the same way (in this case just by pressing a few buttons).[10]

One might parse his language critically, and point out that the kora music already exists both as cultural practice and as recorded object prior to its being rendered onto the page through transcription, or question his assertion that these recordings lack subtle and diverse possibility. However, his point that these recorded sound objects can be read in a manner similar to the musical score is an intriguing one. "We could argue," he continues on his website,

> That this music has had a good or negative effect on Mandé music. We can argue this somewhere else, at another time. But what it does mean is that the sphere of influence of this music has widened to the four corners of the spherical globe. Today I am just as likely to be 'influenced' by the Manuscript Scores of musicians from Renaissance Spain as I am by the Digital Scores of music from the recordings of contemporary griots of West Africa. So be it. … I have used this format passed down from the vihuela masters, just as Sidiki [Toumani Diabaté's father and one of the first kora players to have recordings of his music widely circulated] used the format of the modern recording engineers to create his own score. My hope is that this score will enlarge the *realm of possibility* [emphasis in original] once more, because low-tech is a wonderful thing.[11]

A question that merits further exploration elsewhere concerns the effect these recordings are having on griot music making practice and pedagogy in West Africa. As Gripper observed, on an eventual trip to Mali to study and visit with Toumani Diabaté, among others: "Toumani makes *Kaira* in 1987, and that's the first really popular kora album

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[10] http://www.derekgripper.com/
[11] Ibid

that a lot of people are going to be hearing. And you walk around [Bamako] and hear these students playing it note for note. And you also hear kora students who have recorded their lessons and they're learning from sound bites off their phones. And they're listening constantly to recordings, and they're learning to play those recordings." One could wonder if this process is formalizing a canon of performers in a way that was never formalized as such prior to the recording of this music. For example, Gripper noted in our interview that ethnomusicologist and producer, Lucy Durán, relayed a story to him of encountering a kora player in the Gambia, where the instrumental tradition is quite distinct from that in Mali, playing Toumani Diabaté's recorded repertory note for note.[12]

He concludes, "Mali has scores now. It's just not written, but it's exactly the same thing. They have, for the first time, a possibility of having a fixed version of a musical thing. And that's like a massive, huge change. That's going to change the whole nature of the music in the next few years … That and the tuning pegs (laughs)."[13] Gripper's way of framing these recordings as musical scores allows him to enter this stream of music as an interpreter in the classical sense. As mentioned above, encountering these news scores as an interpreter has had profound impacts on Gripper's performance practice. However, inventing a new space of interpretation, somewhere between the music industry's notion of a sound recording and a score, has brought him into a complex, grey area in terms of ownership and copyright.

From Digital Score to Digital Manuscript: Ownership and Copyright

> It's a really grey area … it's really complicated … it's .. it's really difficult … If I was from Mali, I would be playing what I'm playing and saying it was mine.[14]

[12] Personal interview on 4/4/17.
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid

Gripper has mounted a fairly successful career on the basis of his transcriptions of West African griot music. He's been able to access of level of international notoriety rare for any musician, and exceeding that of all but a few West African artists.[15] These dynamics are complex, as Gripper acknowledges. He sells his transcriptions on his website, but as far as one can tell, those proceeds stay with him. In performances, he is careful to credit Diabaté or other kora players as the composers, so that they may collect mechanical royalties, even if their songs are perhaps more closely related to the industry standard of "traditional arrangement" rather than "composer." But as Gripper rightly points out, this particular scenario doesn't easily fit into the industry's limited view of copyright law. "It's a really messy area." He told me,

> But I think it's messy because copyright is messy. I don't think it's messy because the music is messy, or my own relationship with it is messy, or because Toumani's messy. I think it's just because we have a wrong view of what composition is. I think this idea of putting together three chords that have never been put together and singing a melody on top that's never been sung and then that's totally original and if anyone comes along and does the same thing than they are plagiarizing you. That's a really limited view of things. It's the chicken and the egg, and it's like where's the dividing line, and … I don't know … I'll find, a lot of the time, that I'll play a piece to somebody like Toumani or a local musician here, and it'll be *their piece* and they'll say "Oh, that's your composition." Because for them the dividing line is very different. Soon as you bring something of your own to it [it becomes yours].

This discussion not only points out the limitations of the music industry's conception of ownership; it also signals important differences in how distinct music traditions consider ownership within their particular world of music. It further points to the complex terrain of power often embedded in cross-cultural music making. "And then the whole things blurs and breaks apart," he told me, "and the whole concept of ownership and

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[15] He has toured a great deal, performing at venues such as the Kennedy Center in New York, and his recordings have been broadly reviewed by top leading media outlets.

copyright and 'the composer' and 'the piece of music' are all just a load of bullshit, and that's really the problem."[16]

Derek Gripper's story is an interesting example of cross-cultural music making in the contemporary moment. It illuminates the role of recorded sound in the shifting pedagogies of music learning. It allows us to consider important questions of representation: whose image do we associate with kora music, as Gripper's guitar renderings continue to find audiences worldwide? Is kora music a cultural resource rightfully owned by the inheritors of the griot tradition? Should it stay as such? His story illuminates the hot water that artists interested in cross-cultural exchange often find ourselves wading into. How can we best navigate these waters with integrity? Gripper's story reflects the complexity associated with cross-cultural music making in the contemporary world.

[16] Personal interview on 4/4/17.