

CD REVIEWS

Kitaffe, 2007, Damascus Kafumbe, Endongo Records 751937326021. One compact disc (45:57) containing eight tracks, all composed, arranged and performed by Damascus Kafumbe. Liner notes include translations and interpretations by Damascus Kafumbe with eight colour photographs by Richard Duncan. Recorded, mixed and mastered by Troy Stoner at Ilml Studios, Tallahassee, FL, USA. Available at Amazon.com, CDbaby.com, CDuniverse.com, musicimport.biz, and soon at endongo.com.

Damascus Kafumbe opens his second solo offering with a prayer that sets the tone for the whole album. “Kitaffe”, the title track of this record, is Kafumbe’s rendition of the Lord’s Prayer in Luganda translation. His vocal delivery is as clear and sweet as the *adungu* harps he plays for his accompaniment. In each of the tunes that follow, Kafumbe retains this meditative mood as he ruminates on various aspects of life at home in Uganda. With a hint of sadness in his voice, he sings the melancholy poetry of an African musician living thousands of miles from home. This palpable vulnerability emerges through Kafumbe’s plaintive vocal style, his guitar-like plucking on the harp, and his ability to produce soft, round tones on every drum as if he were touching them reverently.

The three tracks after “Kitaffe” fit together like a suite, evoking nostalgic images of morning in Uganda: a sunrise welcomed by women sweeping the sidewalk, street vendors hawking sweet morning treats to people on their way to the office, and a cock crowing to let his neighbours know that morning has broken. “Olweeyo” uses the image of a local broom made from a type of long, soft grass as a metaphor for Africa’s contemporary problems and possible solutions. Kafumbe appeals to a mother’s influence over Africa’s nobler sensibilities with the lyric *Twera nnyo Maama, twera nnyo* (“We sweep [Africa] Mama, we sweep”). He pushes the tempo up a notch at the end of the tune, emphasizing the urgency of this work. “Kabalagala” refers to a kind of fried bread that Ugandans often enjoy with morning tea. This tune contains some particularly tasty multi-tracking that allows Kafumbe to accompany himself for solos on the *adungu* harp and single-stringed *ndingidi* fiddle. The crowing cock in “Bukedde” beckons people to wake up as if to propel them toward the work suggested in “Olweeyo”. All three tracks feature *adungu* harps prominently, usually as a pair that provides the minor harmonies for Kafumbe’s haunting melodies. *Ndere* flute interludes add another layer of harmonic complexity to the mix. The minor key harp duet sound, the common key of the first and third tunes, and the implied thematic associations make for an extremely effective suite.

“Akadongo” pictures a child playing a lamellophone. The interplay of lamellophone and harp on this track creates a heavily syncopated backdrop for a simple, beautiful tune about various scenes surrounding the child and his *kadongo*: children going to study, to pray, to fetch water or firewood, and to kick the soccer ball. The children keep playing their *budongo* (pl. of *kadongo*) and getting better every day. They are hopeful, implying

that if Uganda's youth can focus on their most promising creative abilities, they can do great things. Kafumbe's extended drumming techniques punctuate the track, bringing out well-placed harmonics and adding even more rhythmic interest to an already thick texture.

The eighth track, an instrumental entitled "Tubebbere", showcases Kafumbe's talent on multiple instruments. Throughout the record he makes innovative use of the *adungu* harp, but on this track he features the *ndongo* lyre. We still hear the harp, but now in a strictly supportive capacity. The single-stringed *ndingidi* fiddle, on the other hand, finds its most prominent voice on the record here. The drumming on this track, as on "Ombuzza Otya" and others, creates a counterpoint with the other instruments more reminiscent of a bass player than a drummer. This kind of drumming is a testament to Kafumbe's sophisticated technique and sensitivity. In the absence of lyrics, "Tubebbere" reminds us that he has in fact been playing *all* of those instruments all along. The more I hear this record, the more Kafumbe convinces me that his refined musicality applies equally to all of his instruments.

Kafumbe finishes this record as prayerfully as he began. A final track, "Kale Ojjukiranga", implores the listener not to forget Him (God), who gives life, wisdom, strength, offspring, friends and riches. It seems Kafumbe has not forgotten how to make beautiful Ganda music on this, the only track that uses the ubiquitous Ganda *baakisimba* rhythm. His is not the raucous *baakisimba* of all night possession rituals or the speed-mongering version common in school music competitions. Consistent with the rest of the record, restraint and nuance rule the day: *ayimba n'avuga ne ggono* (he sings and plays with elegance). Kafumbe displays these tendencies with particular clarity through his *bisoko* variations on the *ngalabi* long drum.

With one ensemble record (*Basse Ente*, self-released in 2004) and one solo LP (*Gumuma*, self-released in 2005) behind him, Kafumbe's mature voice comes through on *Kitaffe* with his most personal and honest sound to date. The instrumentation of the record reflects his preference for *adungu*, which he uses to show off his unique harp style. Luckily we get plenty of opportunities to hear him on other instruments. Here his style shows consistency in good tone and rhythmic interest. Sharp musicality also governs his drumming; he integrates it seamlessly into his own multi-tracked ensemble as a voice with as much tonal interest as any of the others. When he sings, his propensity toward restraint and understatement with the instruments emphasizes the lyrics for a satisfying balance. Title translations and poetic interpretations in the liner notes provide listeners with everything they need to experience the shape of Ganda music. Kafumbe is working on a remix of this record, and this reviewer is convinced that his innovative approach to African instruments will only be magnified by an unprecedented combination of Ugandan talent and American studio technology.

Peter Hoelsing, Florida State University