

Growing into music in Mali: perspectives on informal learning from West Africa

By Lucy Durán, SOAS, University of London

Chapter in Economidou, Natassa, and Stakelum, Mary (eds). *European Perspectives on Music Education vol. 4: every learner counts*. Innsbruck: Helbling Verlag (2015), pp. 49-64



Photo caption

Adama Diarra (*balafon*, right) leads a rehearsal at home with his children and nephews including Waly Coulibaly (*balafon*, left), and Thierre Diarra (*djembe*, left).

Photo: Lucy Duran, Bamako, March 2015

Abstract

Despite the fact that Mali is famous for its musical traditions, some of which date back to the 13th century, very little research has been done on the passing down of musical knowledge from one generation to the next. Yet surely this is a key to understanding how these oral musics have survived into the 21st century with such vigour. In this chapter I reflect on how children within specialist Malian musical families (*jelis*, also known as *griots*) acquire musical skills. The chapter draws on many years of research in the region, particularly between 2009 to 2012 when I engaged in a film-based project entitled ‘Growing into music – musical enculturation in oral traditions’.

There is a small but growing ethnomusicological literature documenting aspects of childhood musicality in Africa (see Rice 2003, Campbell & Wiggins 2013), but almost nothing on Mali except for passing comments in Charry (2000). I am inspired by the idea of

‘enskilment’, a term from anthropology, first used by Gísli Pálsson in his study of apprenticeship in Icelandic fishing (Pálsson 1994), and since taken up by others including Tim Ingold (2000) and Trevor Marchand (2010, 2015) writing about the acquisition of artisanal skills. The chapter presents local discourses around music, modes of transmission, the inheritance of talent and how to measure progress. Some of these findings have strong resonances with work on informal learning in the classroom by Lucy Green (2001, 2008), and by providing new data from West Africa, I hope to stimulate further scholarship on this topic.

Introduction

It is school holidays in Bamako, capital of Mali, at the end of March 2015. The ringing tones of djembe drums resound out of a first floor window in a modest two-story house, on an unpaved side street. Friends and neighbours, mostly women, drawn by the music, are slowly gathering in a sitting room where the musicians, a group of boys, aged 6-14, are expertly playing various percussion instruments. These include *djembe*, West Africa’s famous goblet-shaped drum, and a *balafon* (an 18-key xylophone, tuned to a pentatonic scale¹). This is the house of Adama Diarra - a well-known Malian percussionist – who is conducting a rehearsal; in a few days, these children will be performing for the first time ever in public. Adama has been asked to launch a new concert series at the National Museum devoted to Mali’s talented musical children²; it will be broadcast around the nation, and the importance of the occasion brings an unusual intensity to the rehearsal, though there is much laughter and enjoyment. Young girls perform a light stepped dance in front of the drummers; toddlers run around and bounce to the rhythms.

Adama Diarra is a Bobo *griot* – that is, he was born into a hereditary lineage of professional musicians of the Bobo people, a minority ethnicity from the southeast of Mali. Bobo traditions are much less known and less widely recorded than those of the hereditary musicians of the Mande peoples from western Mali, whose instruments are the 22-key heptatonic *balafon*, the *ngoni* (4-string lute) and *kora* (21-string calabash harp). Many of Mali’s internationally famous musicians, such as *kora* player Toumani Diabaté, are Mande. But locally, Bobo musicians are in demand to play in Bamako at street parties organised by the youth, because theirs is highly rhythmic music, considered excellent for dancing.

Despite the fact that Mali is famous for its musical traditions, some of which date back to the 13th century, very little research has been done on the passing down of musical knowledge from one generation to the next, and on informal embodied learning during childhood. Yet surely this is a key to understanding how these oral musics have survived into the 21st century with such vigour.

¹ There are several different regional types of balafon – more accurately called a bala -, with varying numbers of keys and tunings.

² The series *Jeudis Musicaux des Enfants* (Musical Thursdays for children) was launched on 2 April 2015 at the National Museum of Mali, sponsored by the Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI), part of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Culture. <http://www.akdn.org/Content/1328>

I am consultant to AKMI’s project in Mali, and it was my idea for one of the Museum’s weekly Thursday afternoon free concerts to be dedicated to children, as was the choice of Adama Diarra’s family to lead this new initiative. I gratefully acknowledge the generous support of AKMI in making it possible for me to be in Bamako in March 2015 to attend the concert.

In this chapter I reflect on how children in Mali acquire musical knowledge and skills in the informal setting of the home, within the specialist musical families (*griots*) who are the designated musicians of Malian society (sometimes described as castes, though the term is problematic³; see Frank & Conrad 1995). For nearly thirty years I have been going back and forth to Mali to research music in the south of the country and to produce albums by some of its top *griot* musicians.³ I have watched the young sons and daughters of those artists grow up, some turning into superb performers in their own right; others not. I often wondered what determined this, given that most *griots* feel a duty to pass their knowledge on to all their children. Was this down to individual motivation, musical environment, nurtured development or natural talent, or a combination of these? Elders in this culture have often shared their stories with me of the strict home environment in which they themselves had learnt music, sometimes even receiving beatings from their fathers or teachers if they did not progress; but they emphasised that “things were different now”. How were ideas about musical transmission changing, and what impact was this having on the tradition? To find out, I needed to follow transmission in process more closely.

From 2009 to 2012 I engaged in a film-based research project entitled ‘Growing into music – musical enculturation in oral traditions’, which focused on childhood learning. The results can be seen in my two ‘Growing into Music in Mali’ films⁴, of which more discussion follows later on; the data and findings presented here are drawn from this project.

I do not come to this subject as a teacher, but as an ethnomusicologist, interested in what ethnography can bring to discussions about music education. There is a small but growing ethnomusicological literature that documents aspects of childhood musicality (see Rice 2003, Campbell & Wiggins 2013), but almost nothing on Mali except for passing comments in Charry (2000). I am inspired by the idea of ‘enskilment’, a term from anthropology, first used by Gísli Pálsson in his study of apprenticeship in Icelandic fishing (Pálsson 1994), and since taken up by others including Tim Ingold (2000) and Trevor Marchand (2010, 2015) writing about the acquisition of skills. The term is meant to capture the embodied nature of becoming a ‘skilled’ individual. Skills are not something out there to acquire, but rather it is through long, dedicated practice, making mistakes and problem solving that one becomes skilled. Enskilment as a term is meant to capture that process. Pálsson comments that ‘personal enskilment, in both fishing and doing ethnography, means not mechanistically to internalize a stock of knowledge but to be actively engaged with an environment’. (Pálsson, 1994, p. 901).

Filming children over three years learning music in specialist musical families, such as that of Adama Diarra, provided many insights into musical and social values in the cultures of southern Mali. It also raised many questions, such as the role that formal music education (almost non-existent in Mali, as discussed later on) might play in a culture where hereditary musicians for centuries have had the monopoly on public performance. To understand the implications of this for transmission, in this chapter I provide some data generated by ‘Growing into Music’ on cultural ideas in Mali around music, musicians, music education, and what constitutes talent and progress. Some of these findings have strong resonances with work on informal learning in the classroom by Lucy Green (2001, 2008), and by providing new data from West Africa, I hope to stimulate further scholarship on this topic.

³ I have produced seven albums by kora player Toumani Diabate (including the album *Toumani & Sidiki* released in 2014); the first two solo albums by *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyate and his group Ngoniba; and the debut album of Trio Da Kali, among others.

⁴ available for streaming on the Growing into Music website, along with films from the other countries, <http://growingintomusic.co.uk>

Adama Diarra and family at the rehearsal

In 2009, I became the 'Principal Investigator' of the project 'Growing into music – musical enculturation in oral traditions', funded by a grant from the Beyond Text - Arts and Humanities' Research Council UK. This involved a team of four ethnomusicologists filming the process of oral transmission of music in six countries, over a period of three years. Dr Geoffrey Baker (Royal Holloway) filmed *rumba* in Cuba and *música llanera* in Venezuela; Dr Nicolas Magriel (SOAS) filmed North Indian classical music and Rajasthani folk music of the Langas and Manganiyars; Dr Sanubar Baghirova (Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences) filmed *mugham* and *ashiq* music of Azerbaijan; and this author (SOAS) filmed children in griot families in southern Mali and Guinea.⁵ Our work opened up a new cross-cultural perspective on the contrasting ways that children learn music in these strikingly different historical cultural and political contexts; though some views, such as music being 'in the blood', were shared by all.

In addition to overviewing the whole project and directing the comparative film, I was responsible for filming in Mali. The timing of this work was, by coincidence, perfect. Just as the filming phase came to an end, there was a coup d'état in March 2012 which ousted Mali's president, leading to political instability and the occupation of the north of the country by Jihadist militants. Musical life even in Bamako was severely interrupted. It would have been difficult to continue musical research under these circumstances. My once frequent trips to Mali were curtailed.

Now in March 2015, with stability restored to the south of the country, I had gone back, so that I could participate in the rehearsals and the National Museum concert. I also wanted to follow up on the children I had filmed three years earlier, and see how they had progressed. One of these was Adama Diarra's eldest son, Thierre. In the rehearsal today, Thierre took the role of lead *djembe* player, which he carries off with panache - playing with maturity, a solid technique, and creativity. The playful, exuberant element is still there, too; it is an intrinsic part of the *djembe* tradition. I had been worried that Thierre might have 'grown out of music', and instead, was thrilled to see that he had continued to grow into his father's musical tradition.

I first met Adama Diarra over a decade ago, as part of my research on women singers in Mali, since he was (and still is) in much demand as percussionist by some of the country's top divas at the ubiquitous wedding parties that animate Bamako on Sundays.⁶ But it was only in 2010 that I first discovered Adama's talent as a music teacher – or perhaps a more accurate description would be, his talent as 'role model and transmitter of musical culture'. In February of that year, while in Bamako filming for 'Growing into Music', I attended a rehearsal for a wedding party by a popular group of traditional musicians, which included Adama Diarra. Sitting quietly next to him was his 4 year-old son Thierre. When the band took a break, little Thierre eagerly grabbed the *djembe* (this was a struggle, as the drum, carved from a solid log, was almost his height and much heavier), and started to beat out a flurry of rhythms - with remarkable dexterity.

⁵ All these films are available for viewing on the Growing into Music website, <http://growingintomusic.co.uk>

⁶ This is the subject of a popular song 'Dimanche à Bamako' (CD Nonesuch, 2005) by the famous blind couple of Mali, Amadou & Mariam.

The band looked on with amazement. ‘Oh, Thierre’s a natural’ was Adama’s comment. ‘I’ve never had to teach him anything! He just picks it up by himself!’ Thierre himself then chipped in, ‘Me, I’m even better than my dad! Look!’ And he banged out more rhythms on the djembe, imitating perfectly his father’s gestures, to the delight of all who were present.

I told Adama of my *Growing into Music* filming, and we arranged for me to visit him at home the very next day. Over the next two years I filmed Thierre as he progressed on *djembe* – interacting with his siblings, playing along with his father and uncles, accompanying his cousins dancing. It was evident that his talent was nurtured in an environment of constant music and positive encouragement under the watchful eye of his dad. And now, five years later, I was back at his home, to watch the rehearsal for the National Museum concert and incidentally, see how Thierre was faring as a drummer.

During long school holidays such as this one, Adama’s brothers and cousins from around the city send their children to stay with him, so they too can learn Bobo music. In the cultures of southern Mali, such as the Mande and Bobo, only boys are encouraged to play instruments; the task of girls is to dance and sing. This gendered division of musical labour is fairly universal in West Africa⁷, but particularly evident in griot families.

In the sitting room where Adama was rehearsing with the children, there was a huge television, but otherwise, apart from musical instruments and a football, there were few children’s toys and no books. But even the football was soon turned into a musical object – a toddler kicked the ball one minute, and the next placed it between the knees and hit it with both hands as if a drum. Music is one of the main pastimes for the Diarra children; consequently, the level of musical skill in this room was astonishingly high, even though none of these children has studied music; it has all been learnt in the home.

Indeed, in Mali, there is almost a complete lack of formal music education. Instead, families of griots like that of Adama Diarra are left to their own devices to continue the transmission of their centuries’-old skills and knowledge to the next generation. In the rapidly changing society of 21st century Bamako, there has been some erosion to the time-honoured roles and music of the *griot*, some of which dates back to the Mali Empire (c. 1235-1469). But it would be difficult to grow up in this household and not be musical; Adama is a multi-instrumentalist, playing *balafon*, *kora*, guitar, and all kinds of percussion, and is equally adept at various ethnic styles. The sounds of these instruments are a constant backdrop to the Diarra household activities.

Most of the time, the children in Adama’s household learn music by listening, watching, imitating and participating - the time-honoured elements of ‘enculturation’ and enskilment. Even without being able to play the music, their ears have absorbed its grammar and structures, and the toddlers imitate the body language of drumming, with its interlocking movement of left and right hands. But the impending concert at the museum was acting as a powerful incentive for the adults to be more didactic and interventionist than usual.

In addition to taking part in the performance, or ‘learning by doing’ (Koops 2010), at today’s rehearsal the children were being taught specific rhythms and given drills. Adama guides, but does not conduct - the players must listen to what the others are doing, to make sure they keep up the tempo and slot their part in to the musical tapestry with perfect accuracy. But Adama also drew on some of the pedagogical skills he has picked up from

⁷ for more discussion of the gendering of musical tasks, see comments by Djemory Kouyaté of the Niagassola family, in the film ‘*Growing into Music in Mali part 2: do farala a kan: something has been added*’. <http://growingintomusic.co.uk>.

teaching foreign students, occasionally stopping the music to correct - which is not the norm (as discussed later on). Adama explained that, because of the imminent concert, he was being more interventionist with his children. As with many African traditions that are framed around percussion, absolute precision is required – a split-second mistake could demolish the entire performance. The three young *djembe* drummers, led by Thierre, who is now nearly 10 years old, sat in a row, each one with a different rhythmic function, their hands flying in perfect synchronicity.

Every now and then, two cousins, aged 6 and 10, played *balafon* duets, beating out circular riffs on the wooden keys, whose gourd resonators provide a buzzing timbre that is part of the *balafon*'s aesthetic. These two boys were playing a well-known tune from the Segou region of Mali called *Bamanaya*, taking it in turn to improvise a cascading melody, swiftly striking the same key as a means of sustaining the note. The 6-year-old, Waly Coulibaly (Adama's nephew) was totally immersed in the tune, his hands flying so fast that they were a blur. The 10-year-old, Daniel Dambele (another nephew) demonstrated a poise and musicality way beyond his years.

One of the challenges of filming children learning music in such situations is, how to capture that moment of growing into music? One might as well try to document how a toddler learns to speak. Ideally, one needs to be filming around the clock. But when Adama's 4-year-old son, Kalifa, began punching the air with two small *balafon* mallets, imitating the dexterous interlocking movements of his cousins, it struck me that this was as close as one might get to witnessing a moment when a child is 'growing into music'.

The status of music and music education in Mali

It is an often-heard cliché that music plays a central role in people's lives in Africa. The literature on children learning music in Africa is still surprisingly limited. Writings typically portray a high level of musical ability from early years, and attribute this to a 'rich musical environment'⁸. For example, Koops writes of The Gambia, which shares some cultural features with neighbouring southern Mali:

“The children I encountered in The Gambia were surrounded by music: mothers singing to them, neighbors playing, relatives drumming, teenagers listening to popular music, religious leaders praying and singing. Music was a vital part of daily life and, as a result, was pervasive in day-to-day life.”
(Koops 2010, p.27)

It is however dangerous to assume that what holds true for one community or one African country or region also applies to another. Many factors contribute to difference – geography, location, cultural practice, pre-colonial and colonial history, as well as contemporary politics. Mali is a case in point.

⁸ a phrase used by Koops (2010). Similar generalising statements about children's musicality in Africa are made by Oehrle (1991).

Mali has a special history, as it was the centre of some of West Africa's most powerful pre-colonial empires⁹, and the legacy of its cultures, languages and music can be felt throughout the region. Yet despite its illustrious past, it is one of the poorest countries in the world, with few natural resources. On a worldwide scale, West Africa has the lowest rate of literacy, and within the region, Mali is one of four countries with the very lowest rates¹⁰. And yet it has one of the highest profiles in the world music industry, and has produced many award-winning and internationally successful artists over the past three decades¹¹.

Music is indeed a vital part of everyday life here. But this statement needs to be qualified, because there is a clear division between those who play music (*griots*, born into musical lineages) and those who do not ('freeborn', often the patrons of griots; see Charry 2000). Most of Mali's diverse ethnicities have their own *griot* musicians - each with its own musical traditions and special instruments, though there is some shared repertoire¹². Musicians, along with blacksmiths and leatherworkers, are collectively known as '*nyamakalaw*' or 'handlers of unseen energy'. This reflects attitudes towards music as being powerful and even dangerous, capable of making otherwise inexplicable things happen, such as tree trunks splitting as a singer performs ancient texts from the era of the Mali empire¹³.

A non-*griot* who wants to learn to sing or play a *griot* instrument such as the *balafon* will meet with considerable social opposition. Those who are born into the 'freeborn' social group are only likely to participate in music by dancing - never by singing or playing. For that reason, Mali does not really conform to the stereotyped image of African music as involving the whole community, although music within *griot* families may be highly participatory. *Griots* are regarded as a separate social category and of different, lower status to that of the 'freeborn'. They are sometimes accused of singing 'empty' praises of the wealthy and powerful, although *griots* counter this argument by saying that they alone have the licence to criticise those in power. There is a certain stigma attached to the *griots*, who are still to this day expected to marry within the artisan "castes", and who are considered a different 'race' (*siya*) (see Conrad & Frank, 1995).

In that sense, music in Mali is the opposite of inclusive. But two points must be made in connection with this statement. First - as we have seen with the example of Adama Diarra - in *griot* families, 'every learner counts'¹⁴. Every *griot* child is encouraged to learn some of the musical and verbal skills expected of *griot* status, even if they do not demonstrate special talent. *Griots* will justify this over and over again with phrases such as 'it is in our blood' and

⁹ see Conrad (2005)

¹⁰ 'From Closed Books to Open Doors: West Africa's literacy challenge', 2009 analysis of exclusion applied to education in West Africa, by coalitions of specialized NGOs, including Action Aid, OXFAM. Brief by Caroline Pearce.

<http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/Closed%20books%20West%20Africa%20literacy%20challenge.pdf> [14.4.15]

¹¹ For example, more Grammy Awards have been won by Malians than by any other Africans. This includes Ali Farka Toure, Toumani Diabate, (both of whom have had multiple awards and/or nominations); Kasse Mady Diabate, and Bassekou Kouyate. Other internationally successful artists include Oumou Sangaré, Amadou and Mariam, Rokia Traore, Fatoumata Diawara, and Salif Keita.

¹² There is a vast literature on the griots and their music. See Charry 2000, Durán 2006, 2007, 2013 for more information

¹³ See Duran 2007 for discussion of the esoteric power of song in Mande culture.

¹⁴ To quote from the title of the European Association for Music in Schools annual conference held in Cyprus in 2014, where a version of this paper was first presented.

'you are born a *griot*, you do not become one'.¹⁵ This is why in many *griot* households there is a vibrant culture of live music that permeates every day life, in which children absorb and learn both 'vertically' (inter-generational guidance from elders) and 'horizontally' (via peer learning)¹⁶. For this reason, one-to-one lessons are rare. They only happen as a last resort, for example, when extended families split up into smaller groups for economic or other reasons. They do not appear to have a particularly constructive impact on musical progress, as opposed to peer learning, which is very important among *griots*, because children not only teach each other through example, but they also provide the context for participatory and playful learning.

Observation during Growing into Music filming revealed that the greater the number of children playing music together, the more likely it is that gifted children will progress through the ranks. This can be seen quite clearly in the film featuring the extended family of *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyate, in Garana, central Mali (see 'Growing into Music in Mali part 2: *do farala a kan*, something has been added'). In my many years of working in Mali, I have noted that school holidays are times when musical talent develops exponentially, because many children may be placed under one roof under the care of an adult who is known for his/her skills in music teaching.¹⁷ Such was the case with Adama Diarra described earlier.

The second point related to the idea that 'every learner counts' concerns social change that opened up a space for non-*griots* to play music. Mali's first democratically elected government came into power in 1992, ending more than two decades of military dictatorship. It was around this time that a new category of musicians began to emerge, who called themselves by the French language term 'artistes', also by the term 'songbirds' (in Bamanan: *kòndò*) in order to differentiate themselves from *griots*. In other words, these were musicians by choice, not by birth, who portrayed their art as singing about the problems of the community rather than to exalt individuals. The female vocalist Oumou Sangaré is one successful example of such a 'songbird'; her songs defend the position of women and critique the institution of polygamy.¹⁸ However, unlike the *griots*, these 'artistes' often have less of a commitment to pass on their musical skills to the new generation. Meanwhile, the view of music as a socially inferior occupation, not to be encouraged, lingers on.

Negative attitudes towards music as a profession persist stubbornly to this day in Mali and have a significant impact on the culture of learning music, especially with regard to the music of *griots*. While a few exceptionally talented *griots* are highly valued by the government, and are called upon to perform at official occasions such as the celebration of Independence Day (September 22), nevertheless, no resources are put into their training.

Such views radically affect the provision of music education in Mali, where across the entire country, there are only two institutions in which music can officially be studied. These are both located in Bamako, the capital, and they are both at higher education level: the Conservatoire des Arts Bala Faséké Kouyaté (founded in 2001) caters for post-baccalaureat

¹⁵ There are several statements to that effect in the opening few minutes of the Growing into Music in Mali film 'Da kali – the pledge to the art of the griot'. <http://www.growingintomusic.co.uk/mali-and-guinea-music-of/films-of-growing-into-music.html>

¹⁶ Ideas such as 'horizontal' versus 'vertical' learning modes are explored cross-culturally in the 'Growing into Music' composite film, which can be seen on the video page of the website www.growingintomusic.co.uk.

¹⁷ The impact of rehearsing in a group during school holidays in Mali can be seen in the dramatic improvement of young kora player Salif Diabaté, as featured in the Growing into Music in Mali film, 'Da kali – the pledge to the art of the griot' (on website listed in footnote 9 above).

¹⁸ See Duran 1995 and 2000

students, and the Institut National des Arts (INA) (founded in 1964¹⁹) caters for talented secondary school pupils. Both have extremely limited resources and take very small numbers of students.

INA has a much longer history and focuses more on traditional Malian arts than the Conservatoire. The small music department in the Conservatoire primarily teaches Western music, though there are occasional lessons by Mande *griots* on *kora* (21-string calabash harp) and voice. Most of the music teachers at the Conservatoire between 2002-12 were supplied by the Cuban government, which has a long relationship with Mali. These teachers came from Santiago de Cuba, and had little if any knowledge of Malian culture (or languages) prior to their arrival in Bamako; at the Conservatoire, they taught Western notation, music theory, and some Western instruments at a rudimentary level. This has resulted in a disconnect between the methods and types of music that one learns at the Conservatoire, and the local music that is popular on the streets. In an interview with the author in 2010, some of the Cuban teachers complained that their students made little progress, - particularly, the non-*griot* students, who are in the majority at the Conservatoire - because there was no context in the home for music practice.

The political and economic instability caused by Mali's coup d'état of March 2012 (mentioned earlier on) led to the withdrawal of support from Cuba, whose teachers were recalled, and have since been replaced by alumni from the Conservatoire. There is no music tuition whatsoever provided at state primary school level.

Some thoughts from the project 'Growing into Music in Mali'

Here it might be useful to give some basic details about the methodology of making the 'Growing into Music in Mali' films. I spent two, sometimes three periods of between 6 weeks and 2 months each year in Mali, working mainly with eight *griot* families who are generally recognised by Malians as being some of the most outstanding custodians of *griot* tradition.²⁰ They also happened to be people with whom I already had a long working relationship and friendship. Many *griots* are reluctant to share their knowledge outside their own direct family lineage, jealously guarding the repertoires and styles that have been painstakingly cultivated and handed down across the generations. Because I had known the adults in these families in some cases for many years, I had the kind of invisibility that comes of familiarity and trust; I was able to wander in and out without creating fuss or a sense of 'now we must teach the children because Lucy is filming'. Video cameras are widely used in Mali by Malians, and I encountered little self-consciousness when filming. As my musical advisor I was lucky to have a brilliant local musician, the Mande *balafon* player Lassana Diabate, whose children, ironically, have not developed musical skills.

I soon realised that there was almost no verbalised awareness of the methods by which *griot* children acquire their skills and musical knowledge. Most of the people I worked with had never thought about **how** they should pass on their knowledge to the new generation - only **why** (the obligation to their status as *griots*). Not surprisingly, there is considerable variation between one family and another's approach to musical training, and most significantly, between *griots* who live in the countryside in large extended households with

¹⁹ Author's interview with singer and arranger Massambou Wele Diallo (Bamako 2011); he taught at INA for many years. Part of this interview can be seen on the film 'Growing into Music in Mali part 1: Da Kali: the pledge to the art of the griot', 2013.

²⁰ For a list and description of the participants in the films, see the Growing into Music website.

many children, and those who live in the city in smaller family units, often obliged to move frequently from one rented accommodation to another.

In the larger households, what might be deemed as ‘lessons’ almost always seemed like mini performances, where all the children would sit with adults and run through a series of songs from the local repertoire. Usually the eldest adult, often the grandmother or grandfather, would encourage the children to take turns at a solo, and where necessary, sing - or play a line or riff on an instrument - and ask them to repeat, within the context of music already happening. Learning by rote was as close to formal teaching as it got in large families of many children. Correcting did not seem to happen at all. Building confidence was seen as far more important. This struck me as being completely opposite to a lot of music education in the UK.

In the early days of the Growing into Music project, if children were hitting the wrong note or singing out of tune, I had to bite my tongue not to comment; my role was to document impartially, not to impose my own ideas about pedagogy. Once a young boy in a Mande *balafon*-playing family persistently hit the wrong key, but with the right rhythm. “Why don’t you correct him?” I asked his father, who was conducting the ‘lesson’. “Well, because he’s got the movement [between hands] right, and that’s more important” he replied. “Let him learn the movement first until he can do it without thinking. Then he’ll start to hear that he’s hitting the wrong note. And if he doesn’t, other children will correct him. A *griot* has to be confident, how will that happen if you’re always telling them they’re making mistakes?” Encouraging motor movement and confidence are considered more important than the ‘detail’ of pitch, which will either right itself through peer correction, or if not, the child will gradually drop out of music performance.

In some families, it seemed as if the technique of children did not improve over many months, except by adding new repertoire. Progress was described with the phrase ‘something has been added’, which usually meant that some new pieces had been learnt, sometimes in a very basic form. This seemed simplistic to me at first, until I understood that the idea that this concept of ‘progress’ acknowledges how learning new pieces exercises the aural and motor memory.

Griots who live in the countryside tend to have larger families with more children, and therefore a more dynamic home environment for learning. But they face other challenges. With massive rural exodus to Bamako, and emigration to Europe, there are fewer local opportunities for music performance, such as life-cycle celebrations, events in which children can participate and learn skills and repertoire. In Garana, a remote village in the Niger valley, one of the senior members of the Kouyate household has taken on a more active role in music training. She states that the methods of learning are changing radically, because she can no longer rely on the children becoming proficient simply through exposure, immersion and participation. She therefore summons all the children of the extended family whenever possible, after school, to actively teach them through lessons.²¹

In the various films made during the course of the project Growing into Music, across the different cultures where we did research, one of the most significant, and potentially problematic, differences was how methods of oral transmission could effectively be incorporated into an institutional environment. When I began working as ‘Principal Investigator’ of this collaborative cross-cultural project, I confess that I had certain

²¹ The Kouyate family of Garana, where many of the children are girls who are learning to sing, can be seen in the second of the two Growing into music films, ‘Do farala a kan: something has been added. <http://growingintomusic.co.uk>

preconceived ideas on this topic. I could not imagine that oral transmission could be compatible with the formal exigencies of an institution. However, I revised my ideas after working in Azerbaijan - an inspirational example of a country that strongly supports its oral traditions in music schools and does not interfere with oral methods of teaching.²²

And so it was important to learn about views on institutional teaching of music in Mali. For this, I visited and filmed in the Conservatoire, and conducted an extended interview with Malian singer, arranger, and teacher, Massambou Wele Diallo, who has been a key figure in the implementation of a music curriculum in the country. Massambou is a non-*griot* who despite strong family objections, decided to become a singer. He studied first at INA (Institut National des Arts) from 1972-76, and then went on to study music in Cuba for eight years. On returning to Mali, he became the director of Mali's state-subsidised national orchestra (the 'Ensemble Instrumental National'), which consisted almost entirely of *griots* from various ethnicities, an experience that gave him insight into the thinking and musical practice of *griots*. From there he was recruited to run the music programme at INA during the 1990s, and finally was appointed Head of Music at the Conservatoire when it opened in 2002. Few people have the perspective of Massambou on music education and *griots* in Mali. Here are some insightful excerpts from his interview:

"We have two types of musical education. There is the traditional method. This happens uniquely in the *griot* families. This education passes within the family from father to son. And from mother to daughter. If the father is an instrumentalist, it's his role, his job to teach his son to play an instrument... That's reserved for men. And if the child is a girl, her musical education is done by her mother. The mother often is a singer. So it's her duty to teach her daughter to sing like her. And the boy who follows his father everywhere, lives music in exactly the same rhythm as his father...

And when the girl starts to grow up, she accompanies her mother to weddings, to baptisms, to public celebrations. She sits next to her mother, the mother sings, and often she begins to sing the chorus with her mother. That's when she begins to enter the apprenticeship of music. This traditional method of musical education has always existed. Since the time of Sunjata Keita [founder of the Mali empire in 1235], right up till today. But with Independence, Mali's leaders realised that the world evolves, that it was important to evolve in order not to be left behind by the modern world. It was understood that children had to be educated in music in a scientific method, in order to evolve. You can't always stay in the tradition, you have to take music to another level. It's true that students from non-*griot* families don't progress as well [in music schools] because they don't practice at home, they don't have a musical environment. But times are not the same. My father was opposed to me being a musician. But if my son wants to play music, I will open the door for him."²³

Conclusion

My return to Mali in 2015 in order to observe the family of Adama Diarra rehearsing for a public concert at the National Museum, refocused my thoughts on my work in the film-

²² as can be seen in the film 'Growing into Music in Azerbaijan' on the Growing into Music website; <http://growingintomusic.co.uk>

²³ Massambou Wele Diallo, interview in Bamako, 2010, with author for the film 'Growing into Music in Mali part 2: Da Kali – the pledge to the art of the griot'. www.growingintomusic.co.uk

based project 'Growing into Music', and how it might resonate with the theme of 'every learner counts'. This highly significant idea, which emphasises the need for all to have access to music education, has many precedents around the world – but mainly in informal settings. One of them is Mali, a country with a famously rich musical heritage going back many centuries, but almost no institutional support of the transmission of musical knowledge and skills, and no studies of music education in the country.

Mali is an interesting case study, because most professional music is jealously guarded by lineages of designated musicians, the so-called 'griots', who practice their ancient art with extraordinary levels of virtuosity and creativity, which has made them major players on the international music scene. Some of these *griots* still place enormous value on cultivating talent among the new generation – but primarily in their own extended families, where indeed 'every learner counts'. On a governmental level, this grass-roots effort is taken for granted, and therefore, little support is given to the traditional arts in the two existing official music schools.

Despite this, and regardless of the social norms and stigma that hold non-*griots* back from taking up music, music educators around the world can surely benefit from observing the methods of oral transmission and enskilment described here. These methods include: immersion in the music in order to absorb its grammar, before taking up an instrument; giving preference to correct movement over exact execution of notes, for example when hitting the keys of a *balafon*; learning through performance with a group of peers, not all of the same musical level, with minimal intervention of an expert adult; not stopping the music to correct mistakes, in the belief that the mistakes will gradually correct themselves; emphasising confidence and group cohesion as the most important step to nurture budding musicality in each individual. Ultimately, this process is unselfconscious - as discovered during the filming of *Growing into Music* in Mali with musicians such as Adama Diarra and family - and has clearly been in use for centuries, though increasingly mediated by technology, urban life styles, and exposure to other forms of musical pedagogy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Campbell, P.S. 1998. *Songs in their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blacking, J. 1965. *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Campbell, P.S. & Wiggins, T. (Eds). (2013). *The Oxford handbook of children's musical cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Charry, E. (2000). *Mande Music: traditional and modern music of the Maninka and Mandinka of West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Conrad, D. (2005). *Empires of medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*. New York: Facts on File.
- Conrad, D. & Frank, B. (Eds). (1995). *Status and identity in West Africa: nyamakalaw of Mande*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Durán, L. (1995). Birds of Wasulu: freedom of expression and expressions of freedom in the popular music of southern Mali. In *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 4/1995. pp. 101-34.
- (2000). Women, music, and the mystique of hunters. In Monson I. (Ed.) *Garland Series on Ethnomusicology: Conceptual issues in ethnomusicology 1: Africa*. New York: Garland. pp. 137-86.

- (2006). Mali: gold dust by the river. In Broughton, S. Ellingham, M. and Lusk, J. (Eds). *The Rough Guide to World Music: Africa & Middle East*. London: Rough Guides. pp. 219-238.
- (2007). *Ngaraya: women and musical mastery in Mali*. In *Bulletin of SOAS*, 70 (3) pp. 569-602.
- (2013). *Poyi! Bamana jeli music, Mali, and the blues*. In *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 25 (2), 2013. pp. 211-246.
- Green, L. (2001). *How popular musicians learn: a way ahead for music education*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.
- Green, L. (2008). *Music, informal learning, and the school: a new classroom pedagogy*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.
- Koops, L.S. (2010). “Deñuy jàngal seen bopp” (they teach themselves): children’s music learning in The Gambia. In *Journal of Research in Music Education* 58 (1). pp. 20-36
- Marchand, T. (Ed). (2010). *Knowledge: Explorations of the Indissoluble Relation Between Mind, Body and Environment*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute.
- (2015). It’s in our blood: Mali’s griots and musical enskilment. In *Africa* 85 (2), 2015. pp. 356-364.
- Oehrle, E. (1991). An introduction to African views of music making. In *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25 (3), 1991. pp. 163-174.
- Pálsson, G. (1994). Enskilment at sea. In *Man* 29 (4), 1994. pp. 901-927.
- Rice, T. (2003). The Ethnomusicology of music learning and teaching. In *College Music Symposium* 43/2003. pp. 65-85.

BIOGRAPHY

Lucy Durán (PhD, SOAS) is Senior Lecturer in African music at SOAS, University of London. Her principal field of research is Mande music, which she has been researching on location in West Africa since 1977, with special reference to the jelis (‘griots’), the *kora*, and women singers, on which subjects she is widely published. Durán also has a long professional involvement with the media, working as music producer, journalist and broadcaster. She was the regular presenter of BBC Radio 3’s flagship world music programme **World Routes** for the duration of its lifetime on air, 2000-2013. She has produced eighteen albums by several award-winning West African musicians including Bassekou Kouyaté and Toumani Diabaté, with three Grammy nominations; and her most recent production features a collaboration between the Kronos Quartet and the Malian Trio Da Kali. Her research project, ‘Growing into Music in Mali’ documents the musical progress of children in leading Mande jeli (griot) families in both rural and urban environments in Mali and Guinea, on film shot by Durán on location between 2009-12.

