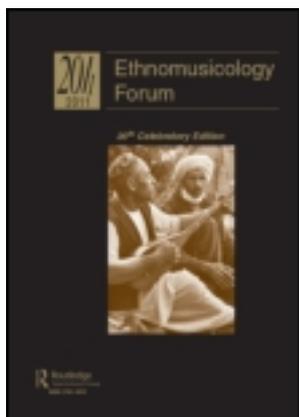


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Music Production as a Tool of Research, and Impact

Lucy Durán

For many years, my professional life has straddled two worlds: that of academia, as Lecturer in African music at the School of Oriental and African Studies; and that of the music industry, as radio presenter and music producer. From this experience, it has been clear that there is often a deep gulf between the two, and that this has not contributed to optimising the exchange of knowledge between them. Academics are often suspicious of what they see as commercially driven, non-rigorous work; music consumers find academic writing hard to read and difficult to access. Yet music academics and those involved in the music industry have many shared interests; and so I view the call for impact and knowledge exchange as timely, since we need to make a greater effort to find ways of learning from each other and getting our work out to wider audiences.

An academic like myself who produces non-print output such as an audio music production, soon discovers that text-based publication remains the medium that is most privileged in research evaluation, even in the field of music and ethnomusicology. Albums that are produced in a studio are frequently regarded as commercially driven synthetic ethnopop, or as exploitative of indigenous cultures (see Cottrell 2010:14–6), or in any case are not peer-reviewed, nor demonstrably based on research. Yet my experience has shown that a CD, produced with sensitivity to a musical culture nurtured by long research, has the potential to have a far greater impact than a publication in a scholarly journal.

In this brief contribution to the roundtable, I focus on my work as producer of West African artists.¹ Music production can mean different things to different people,

Lucy Durán is Lecturer in the Music Department at SOAS, University of London, with a special interest in music of the Mande cultural world, as well as West African popular music and its transatlantic connections, and Cuban music. Her written publications have focused on the women singers of Mali, with chapters in books including *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective* (Garland Press) and articles in journals including *The British Journal of Ethnomusicology* and the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. She has produced albums by artists such as Sephardic singer Yasmin Levy, *kora* player Toumani Diabaté, bluesman Taj Mahal, Guinea Bissau's singer-songwriter Manecas Costa, and Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni Ba. She is also a broadcaster and has been the regular presenter of BBC Radio 3's main world music programme *World Routes* since it began in 2000. Her current research is on the acquisition of musical skills amongst children in griot families, part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Beyond Text project. Correspondence to: Lucy Durán, Music Department, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, UK. Email: ld@soas.ac.uk

and can involve various levels of interaction, intervention and power relations. My own approach could be defined as more editorial than interventionist, although my interest in representing acoustic music could be seen as a form of advocacy. For professional musicians living and working in Mali, the studio is a site where ideas of creativity, innovation, tradition, ownership, and musical boundaries are played out in intensive and often dramatic ways that impact on the wider musical representations of Malian music both locally and globally. I argue that not only is the studio the ‘new field’ (see, for example, Meintjes 2003), but the role of music producer and the interaction with musicians in the process of mediating musical creativity can provide unique insights into the aesthetics and dynamics of a musical culture. And perhaps most important, it results in a format that can be peer-reviewed by musicians themselves, and generate new ideas about the place of musical tradition in the world today.

My work on album production raises many questions about impact: How do you measure it? How do you quantify it? Is it in terms of numbers of people? Which people? One of the things that I have been very interested in—and which was mentioned by Muriel—is how to produce research that is in a format which is ‘useful and accessible’ to the people we are writing about. And the most accessible thing of course is a recording—a published audio-recording, whether on CD or eventually on cassette. In Mali, people listen voraciously to music; this is much more the way that they receive information than reading a book about their music—literacy in Mali is still very low, especially among women, and in any case the majority of people in the country do not read academic books; the book that I am now writing about the women singers of Mali will not be translated into French for a long time, if ever. So the albums that I have produced featuring Malian artists have made, and will make, a far greater impact.

I am going to use the example of two Malian artists I have worked with: the *kora* player Toumani Diabaté and the *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyaté. I am not really a producer for hire: I only work with artists whose music I feel that I understand, that I have really researched; and my approach with the artists is to encourage them to do what they do best. It sounds very simple but it is actually a complicated philosophy for them, because artists who are trying to reach broader audiences are often obsessed with what they think the outside market will like—whereas I encourage them to dig deeper into their own roots, and do what they know best. My role is to say: ‘this kind of album has already been made’ or ‘that song has already been recorded in this way—why don’t you try to do something that’s different and that’s individual and that relates to the style your father played?’

One of the ways in which I feel I have made a significant impact through my album production is by raising awareness and understanding of the *kora*, through Toumani Diabaté. I produced his first album, *Kaira*, in 1987 (Diabaté 1987); it is still, I think, the best selling *kora* album. This was the very first album of solo instrumental *kora*, and one of the first featuring the distinctive style of Malian *kora*. At the time, Toumani, then only 21, was interested in experimenting with multi-tracking himself

in the studio, and had already made one such recording for possible release by the Real World label. However, after long discussion and hours of critical listening, he came round to the idea that he did not need to use such technology and that the *kora* was multi-layered enough in its own right. How different might things have been for both Toumani and Malian music had we approached this album with multi-tracking?

During the 1990s in Mali, the *kora*, and Malian music in general, was becoming increasingly electric. It was rare to hear an instrument acoustically; even in musicians' homes, they would rehearse with full amplification and often with electronic effects such as drum programmes. In the meantime, I had produced some albums with Toumani involving international collaborations; but then I wanted to record something with him that would go back to basics, to take the *Kaira* idea one step further and show where the *kora* was at the end of the twentieth century. The inspiration was an LP recorded in Mali in 1970 called *Cordes Anciennes* (*Ancient Strings*) consisting of just instrumental *kora* duets and trios. It had a very classical feel, almost like Bach with an African tinge. Two of the four *kora* players on that LP were well known to me, the veterans Sidiki Diabaté (father of Toumani) and Djelimady Sissoko (father of another brilliant young virtuoso, Ballake Sissoko). Tracks from that album are still played on a daily basis on Mali's national radio and television stations, some of them as signature tunes. So my idea was to produce a 'new ancient strings' to showcase how the *kora* has moved on, but staying firmly within the concept of ancient strings.

It seemed a simple enough project, but proved to be very ambitious. Despite the relatively low budget, it was a fight to get the record company to support this project; they did not believe that anyone would be interested. Frankly, neither did Toumani at that time. Actually, the financial constraints worked in our favour. I flew to Mali with a sound engineer and we recorded Toumani and Ballake in one straight session on a Nagra just using four microphones, in a marble corridor at the Palais de Congrès in Bamako, on the night of the anniversary of Mali's independence, 22 September 1997 (see Figure 1). My job was to get the best possible performance out of the musicians, to select repertoire and to push them a little beyond the 'noodly' factor (because *kora* music can be quite 'noodly'). The two musicians who had grown up next door to each other had different but complementary styles, sparking off each other with brilliant improvisation, and with ethereal and soulful playing. Back in the United Kingdom, all we did was mix the four tracks and do some editing: there were no added studio effects, no extra reverb, or any alteration of the sound whatsoever. It is what you hear.

This album has done extraordinarily well, selling over 60,000 copies—not bad for an entirely acoustic album recorded in a single night. Most world music albums of this kind rarely sell more than 5,000 copies, if that. This is especially remarkable considering this has happened by word of mouth with absolutely no promotion or publicity. Most important, the album has had an enormous impact on the way people around the world have perceived the *kora* as a world-class instrument, which has arguably contributed to pushing views of African music beyond the stereotype. This



Figure 1 Ballake Sissoko (left) and Toumani Diabaté (right), while recording *New Ancient Strings* in the Palais de Congrès, Bamako, 1997. Photograph: Lucy Durán.

album has also had an impact in Mali itself, raising the profile of the *kora*. For example, Mali's President, Amadou Toumani Touré, presents important guests and visiting heads of state with a miniature *kora*—and a copy of *New Ancient Strings* (see Figure 2). Like the parent LP, one of the tracks of this album, 'Cheikhna Demba', has



Figure 2 Album cover for *New Ancient Strings* (Diabaté and Sissoko 1998). Permission: Hannibal/Ryko.

been adopted as the signature tune of Mali's national radio and television organisation, ORTM. The acoustic *kora* is alive and well in Mali.

How can I account for this? I would say that listeners from all kinds of backgrounds, beyond the niche world music audiences, recognise the great and timeless artistry in this album. The success of *New Ancient Strings* has launched Ballake on his own solo career, staying in purely acoustic mode—his rider stipulates that he does not use an amplifier—and Toumani has gone on to record *The Mandé Variations* (Diabaté 2008), a solo *tour de force* that plays on the Bach comparison. There are many influential and brilliant *kora* players on the world music scene, but most would acknowledge that Toumani sets the benchmark, and I believe that in some way I have encouraged him to take that path. It is about taking risks, believing in your ears, and exposing audiences to representations of 'world music' that go beyond the obvious easy-listen fusions that often displease the academic world.

Another artist that I have worked with whose album has made a huge impact back in Mali and abroad is Bassekou Kouyaté, who plays the *ngoni*, which is much older than the *kora*, going back at least to the tenth century AD in Mali. The *ngoni*, an oblong lute with a skin sound table, and ancestor of the banjo, is an instrument that has contributed to the sound of many well known Malian artists but has not been a focus in its own right. I do not think people had much awareness of what this instrument was capable of on its own, not even in Mali. So in 2006, at a time when Bassekou was quite unknown as a solo artist, we decided to work on an album that would represent the pentatonic bluesy-sounding music from his native tradition, that of the Bamana kingdom of Segou, an empire that ruled in pre-colonial times on the middle Niger valley from 1712 to 1861.² And so Bassekou formed a quartet of different sized *ngonis*—there are no guitars, no *koras*, no *balafons*, nothing else except percussion and the solo voice of Amy Sacko, Bassekou's wife—an unprecedented type of ensemble showcasing the delicate and unique sound of the *ngoni*. Or was it unprecedented?

As music producer, I began researching Bamana repertoire and style. This proved to be more of a challenge than I had anticipated. It was evident that, while the oral epic tradition was documented by various authors (see Conrad 1990), there was an almost complete lack of written information about, not to mention recordings of, the music. Even Eric Charry's encyclopaedic study of Mande music says virtually nothing about the Bamana tradition (Charry 2000). My first-hand investigations started with Bassekou's own memories of learning from his father and his grandfather, Banzoumana Sissoko 'the old lion', one of Mali's most celebrated griots (Keita 1995). I interviewed and recorded members of Bassekou's family at his home in the remote village of Garana; visited some of the historical sites in the Segou region connected with songs, to bring their stories to life; and had lengthy conversations with Bassekou about what he felt to be strong musical links between Bamana music and the Blues, reinforced by his encounters with such musicians as Taj Mahal and Mali's own desert bluesman, Ali Farka Touré. I discovered that, according to the oral

tradition, an ensemble consisting entirely of *ngonis* did in fact exist in pre-colonial times.

This research took place over several months and ultimately provided a concept for the album *Segu Blue*, which was recorded in the Studio Bogolan in Bamako between late June and early July 2006, mostly as ‘live’ with very few overdubs. It was released in March 2007 on a small independent German label, Out | Here, with detailed sleeve notes, including an historical introduction to the Bamana Segu empire by David Conrad (see Figure 3).

This low-budget album did extremely well, helped by the fact that the group toured extensively, and are brilliant live performers.³ This led to a second album, also recorded in Mali, called *I Speak Fula* (2009; see Figure 4), which is more ambitiously



Figure 3 Photograph of the group Ngoni Ba, taken for the album *Segu Blue* (Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni Ba 2007). Photograph: Thomas Dorn. Permission: Out | Here Records.

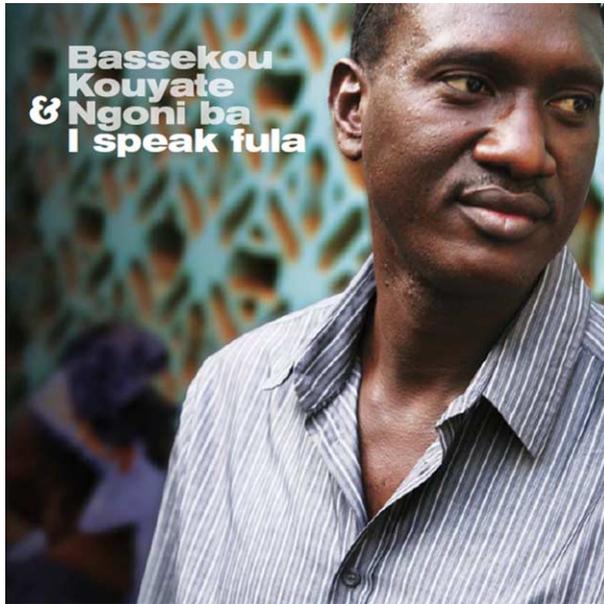


Figure 4 Album Cover for *I Speak Fula* (Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni Ba 2009). Photograph: Thomas Dorn. Permission: Out | Here Records.

produced and has more of a blues and rock edge, although still almost entirely acoustic and with no international collaborations. The impact that this has had in Mali is that the *ngoni* has enjoyed an enormous revival since these two albums were released. And now a lot of young kids want to learn the *ngoni*, whereas before it was virtually a dying instrument. The albums have shed light on the possible historical connections with the Blues; and also helped to raise the profile of the unique pentatonic tradition from the Bamana Segu empire, which has been overshadowed in Mali since the 1980s by other regional styles.

So, to conclude. My music productions are based on long research on Mande music, and my involvement as producer has given me many insights that I would not otherwise have had. This has meant taking risks, since such music does not seem to be obviously commercial. Yet despite the acoustic and low-cost productions, both of these musicians—Toumani Diabaté and Bassekou Kouyaté—are now very well off by Malian standards. The other day, in Paris, as I was boarding a plane to Mali, I heard my name called and it was Toumani behind me in the queue; so we greeted and embraced, but as we got on the plane together, he turned left and I turned right—he was in first class and I was in the last row of economy! And I thought: ‘let nobody say that the producer exploits the artist!’ And just a couple of days ago I was woken up with a telephone call that Bassekou’s second album, *I Speak Fula*, has been nominated

for a Grammy award in the best traditional album category. (It did not win; the award went to a fellow Malian, nominated in the same category—Toumani Diabaté.)⁴

The concept of ‘practice-based research’ is well known in our discipline, but I see the kind of work that I am describing as ‘research-based practice’, and a very important part of what we as ethnomusicologists can do. I wonder how different a trajectory someone like Toumani would have had, if I had only written about him?

Notes

- [1] I am probably more widely known for my work as a radio presenter on BBC Radio 3. However, although my training as an ethnomusicologist has been invaluable, I do not on the whole think of my radio programmes as constituting original research output, except for Durán 2007.
- [2] Segu is the official Malian Ministry of Education Bamana spelling, while Segou is the French spelling that is still widely used on maps and in literature, since French is Mali’s official language. To distinguish between the pre-colonial Segu and colonial and post-independence names (e.g. Segou), I retain these two forms of spelling. See Conrad (1990) for a full-length line-by-line transcription of a recitation of the epic of Bamana Segu.
- [3] See them performing at the G8 Summit in 2008: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zAcQPjkOkA> (accessed 4 June 2011).
- [4] Best Traditional Music Album: *Ali & Toumani*, Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté. World Circuit 083 (London UK, 2010).

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