

A Practical Guide on balafon: Listen, Feel and MOVE!

Introduction

Full of energy and speed, the hardly explicable musical experience of a balafon performance had significant impact on my artistic views as a marimba performer and has drawn my attention to the ethnic origins of my practice. In past decades, composers and performers have initiated numerous music projects to adapt the African sonority to Western classical percussion works. Some of them researched into the African music theory and others have provoked collaborations with African musicians, but barely a work grows out of an inquiry into the performance practice of the genre. As a starting point, I would like to ask some vague questions: “How does a balafon musician perceive music? What does a balafon musician feel when playing his/her instrument?” In spite of some documentation and notation prepared by the Western world, there are few literature sources on balafon music theory and its performance practice. My initial artistic research purpose of transcribing the fascinating balafon sound into marimba repertoire has as such moved towards an ethnographic inquiry into its African roots. This is based on two field studies organized in January 2012 and 2013 in the format of two weeks workshops, conducted by European balafon musician Gert Kilian and African musicians Youssouf and Kassoum Keita.

The first field study in January 2012 was conducted in a village of the Bobo tribe called Konsankuy in Mali of West Africa, the home village of the Keitas. Pentatonic balafon and drums are the main musical instruments of this area and the music repertoire encompasses both the Bobo and Bamana tribe¹ music. The two tribes are good neighbors and they have close social contacts— for example marriage is often arranged between the tribes. They influence each other consistently in culture, music and language. The second field trip was held one year later at Bobo Dioulasso of Burkina Faso, since Mali was unsafe for travel due to terrorism. In addition to the political situations, various happenings in the Keita family had also affected the organization of the workshop, so eventually we could only arrange Youssouf to teach

¹ Strand has listed the gourd-resonated xylophones found in Burkina Faso according to the ethnic groups. Strand, J. L., *The Sambla Xylophone: Tradition and Identity in Burkina Faso*, Connecticut: Ph.D. Dissertation, Wesleyan University, 2009, p.256.

in the workshop, as he resides in Bobo Dioulasso for his music career and balafon building business.

The article is roughly divided in three main parts: 1) the discussion will begin with clarifying the research objectives— the definition of performance practice, learning as a research methodology and the notion of *difference*; 2) the field observations on performance practice— learning the rhythmic and melodic materials, the embodied movement as a vehicle of communication in the oral tradition and the holistic pedagogical approaches; and 3) as a conclusion, the reflections are drawn from the confrontation between my personal artistic views as a Western classical percussionist and the balafon music culture.

An expedition of the balafon performance practice

Performance practice is quite often defined as the unspoken, unwritten or unnotated technical skills that are acquired and transmitted by performers— often discussed in early music concerning the retrieval of the lost historic performance. In this artistic research context, performance practice is considered as an inquiry into the music ‘habit’ collectively endorsed by the balafon musicians, like playing technique, oral tradition, compositional structure, pedagogy, and social function; also, the discussion will concern the absence of analytic system or notation.

Due to the ‘unspoken’ nature of performance practice, investigating the balafon practice is even more obstructed by the oral tradition. The oral tradition that prevails in the balafon practice of the Bobo and Bamana tribe bears a deep historic knowledge which remains unintentionally tacit within practice of the local musicians. This is truly reflected by the lessons and the interviews with the Keita family and the local musicians: their cousin Moussa Dembele² and Mandela³. The same situation is

² Moussa Dembele is a multi-talent musician; he plays balafon as his main instrument as well as kora and djembe. He is a cousin of the Keita brothers. He lived in the city Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso in the same neighborhood as the Yousouf Keita’s atelier, a reason why they often play concert together. Moussa Dembele is now living in Belgium and he visits his country on occasion.

³ Mandela (Oumarou Bambara) is a balafon musician who lives in Bobo Dioulasso and now resides in Paris. I have taken some lessons with him during the second field trip and he is an acquaintance of the Keita brothers.

readily observed from the balafon practice in Guinea⁴, and indeed, more visits to other balafon musicians yield even more concrete conclusions. In the balafon practice of the Bobo tribe, knowledge is communicated and passed down verbally without written record and there is no systematization applied to the analysis of musical events. Charry reports similar observations in his specialized research in the Mande Music, when he vaguely defines rhythmic events of the balafon music as “the flow of events over time”, trying to clarify the absence of exact vocabulary ‘rhythm’ in the verbal language of the Mande People⁵. The absence of system and analytic approaches will be discussed based on literature and field observations.

Field studies and interviews of balafon musicians aim at contextualizing a music culture that stands vividly in front of my eyes but is seldom discussed. To the Western academia, the colonial period and the Westernization processes contaminates the African tradition; but in contrast, the African interviewees seem not to care about this and are readily seeking for improvements of instrument building and technical skills without the burden of tradition. For example, as a balafon builder of the Keita brand, Youssouf Keita adapts types of Western instrument construction design into his instrument. He is proud of his new invention ‘marimbalafon’, a reminiscent of the 12-tones marimba where more pitches or, as he calls them, ‘colors’, are added to the original pentatonic instrument. He also tunes his instruments using the Western temperament in hope to increase foreign sales and become more accessible to foreign musicians.

If an investigation of performance practice in early music is the retrieval of historic activities, this ethnographic research is dealing with the tacit balafon practice that occurs in the same era we live, but exists in the African continent. It inquires into musical phenomena that happen not over time but in a space and culture that is different to ours. Music is considered as the ‘habit’ of a group of people living in one region, a collective musical enactment that is observed. Meanwhile, different observations can shed upon these practices. A first interesting consideration can be

⁴ Through Basboot v.z.w., an African music organization based in Gent, Belgium, I have met musicians and students who have their expertise in the Guinean balafon. Observations were obtained through lessons with Pieter de Zutter, an European balafon teacher, his African teacher from Conakry Guinee Seydouba 'Dos' Camara and Rachel Laget, musicologist and researcher.

⁵ Charry, E., *Mande Music*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. xxvii.

drawn from “The Balafon”⁶, a video documentary of the Bobo balafon. Interestingly, Kassoum Keita plays here at both sides of the instrument. He usually takes place at that side of the balafon where the high-pitch is on the left and low-pitch on the right, while the majority of musicians take the opposite side (Illustrations 1 and 2). For marimba, musicians are fixed to play at the low-pitch on their left. Playing at the reverse side is a wild attempt to a marimba performer because the body coordination of the same melody is totally reorganized and the same applies to all keyboardists of Western classical music. Kassoum and Youssouf could not explain the reason behind this extraordinary manner. They think it is a natural talent of Kassoum and also a few balafon musicians in the area; but being a left-hander, they think Kassoum’s left hand has better control and velocity to play the highly decorative fast melodic patterns in the higher register, the ‘two-ways coordination technique’ going to be discussed later. Generally, it is assumed that performance practices proceed from the organology of the instruments, *i.e.* a single row of keys for balafon and a double row for marimba. This brings us to a second consideration. For Youssouf Keita, organology and (social) functionality go together. He considers the balafon music as a product of the people to accompany sung folk tunes— fulfilling social functions⁷. Folk tunes are sung by the griot⁸ of the village to preach and to tell the history. The accompanying balafon is made from natural materials— calabashes to give resonance to the striking sound on some chosen wooden slats and compose (or improvise) music that facilitates the folk tunes and the instrument. Whether the music originated before the instrument is a question we are always confronted with: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Baily (1985) has researched into the influence of the spatial properties of an instrument to the shape of the music played on it. He compared the Herati dutār and the Afghan rubāb in multiple ways: the interaction between the structures of the human body and the structure of the instrument, and how this related to the rubāb and dutār music in different aspects. Various data and evidence showed the potential association between the human behavior and instrument shape⁹.

⁶ *The Balafon—with Aly Keita and Gert Kilian*, Improductions, 2009.

⁷ An interview with Yossouf Keita during the first field study at Village Konsankuy of Mali in January 2012.

⁸ Kassoum Keita is the griot of the Konsankuy village. According to the cast system, griots are the musician, story teller and praise singer of the village.

⁹ Baily, J., “Music Structure and Human Movement in Music” in *Musical Structure and Cognition*, London: Academic Press, 1985, pp. 237-258.



Illustration 1: the person wearing orange is Kassoum Keita, playing balafon at the reverse side.



Illustration 2: the person wearing white and blue is Kassoum, playing a duo with Aly Keita.

Learning as a research tool

The main way to understand a performance practice is by learning balafon with the African musicians and observing their music culture. That is why learning as participating observation—or should we rather say as observing participation—during the field studies is so crucial. Learning is believed to be one important research technique in ethnomusicological research. Baily (2001) has put forth a firm statement:

The importance of this as a research technique, for direct investigation of the music itself, must be emphasized. One understands the music from the ‘inside’, so to speak.¹⁰

¹⁰ Baily, J., “Learning to Perform as a Research Technique in Ethnomusicology” in *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 2001: 10/2, p. 94.

Blacking (1967) has gathered valuable data through learning how to sing the Venda children songs:

My teachers were patient and insisted on correcting my mistakes, so that I began to learn what was expected of a singer and what tolerances were allowed... On some occasions I made deliberate mistakes, and was therefore especially interested if I was not corrected: this would mean that I had sung an alternative melody which, though not that which my teacher knew, was perfectly acceptable according to the canons of Venda music. ¹¹

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the music, my research has allowed me to collect data through participating workshops, private lessons and rehearsals with different balafon musicians¹². As such, this study describes the observations and reflections from the angle of a performer. By way of this field study, I could observe the balafon performance practice and participate in it. The focus of this observing participation was on the communication of musical knowledge, by way of the oral tradition, by listening and participating in how musicians exchange and pass down music concepts. Pedagogical situations reflect the tactics of communication between the people in real-time. The musicians certainly need tools to disseminate the abstract musical knowledge, for example, the arbitrary measurement of timing, the naming of pitch, the melodic arrangement, or the tonal relationships, etc. Although transmitting musical knowledge depends highly on aural ability, a balafon musician sometimes encounters students that are not well- trained in aural ability. This can bring the interesting aspect to the fore of, which methods the balafon musicians will then employ to help a student to learn?

The notion of difference in artistic research

Due to its urge to explore the uncommonness of balafon to enrich the marimba repertoire, this research carries out a comparative analysis and emphasizes the *difference* of the performance practice between the two instruments. *Difference* is

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹² The research has encountered four African balafon musicians: Youssouf Keita, Kassoum Keita, Moussa Dembele, Mandela, who practice a similar balafon tradition of the Bobo and Bamana tribe of the countries Burkina Faso and Mali; also workshops by European balafon musician Gert Kilian in France and Seydouba 'Dos' Camara from Guinea.

written in italics to ostensibly represent its meaning in its purest definition: the matter is discussed by looking through the lens of a performer-researcher who investigates the contrasting musical concepts that can enrich the marimba performance practice. However, we need to be careful by essentializing *difference* while recognizing its potential to induce mapping processes for new artistic outcomes.

Agawu has given a self-debated argumentation to discuss the importance of *difference* in ethnomusicology in his unconventional book “Representing African Music”. One subject in particular—the emblematic meaning of rhythm— has stirred up the discussion of the nature of *difference* in ethnographical research. Rhythm is a vocabulary that we have taken as granted to explain all temporal observations occurring in African music but so far absent in the African lexicon. The lexical gap of rhythm has resulted in the sheer number of terms invented or used by scholars to explain rhythmic organization in African music and still waiting for further interrogation¹³. Jones (1959) in “Studies in African Music” has written extensively on African rhythm, but hardly any single term in the Ewe language is found coherent to ‘rhythm’ in English. Charry (2000) claims that he has not “come across an extensive vocabulary related to ‘rhythm’”¹⁴. Agawu has provided further academic examples to support his claim that ethnomusicology is based on *difference*. Field study journals and reflections from Chernoff (1979), Blacking (1955), Kubik (1963) and among numerous others are excellent examples that ethnographical research grows out of the inquiry of contrasting practice¹⁵. Out of the blue, Agawu has asked some brutal questions upon the matter: “When was the last time an ethnomusicologist went out to hunt for sameness rather than difference? When did we last encourage our students to go and do field work not in order to come back and paint the picture of a different Africa, but of an Africa that, after all the necessary adjustments have been made for material divergence, is remarkably like the West?”

¹³ Agawu, K., *Representing African Music— Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 62-63, 151-171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁵ Some literature as examples of field study journals and reflections: Chernoff, J. M., *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Blacking, J., “Some Notes on a Theory of African Rhythm Advanced by Enrich von Hornbostel” in *African Music*, 1/2 (1955): 12-20. Kubik, G., “Discovery of a Trough Xylophone in Northern Mozambique” in *African Music*, 1963: 3/2, pp. 11-14.

Field Study— Balafon workshops with Youssouf and Kassoum Keita

The Workshops lasted for 10 days and the teachers taught eight to nine songs. Each day was roughly divided into three sessions: a demonstration of the music in the morning, individual practice in the afternoon. To end the day, the teachers played the song again—the main theme and the patterns—for the participants to videotape. Some extemporaneous performances of the teachers have provided valuable information. Towards the end of the period, a concert was organized by the teachers in collaboration with musicians from the neighborhood and the students.

Youssouf always started the day with the story of the song. These songs have a variety of themes: to educate the people, for festivity, to cheer up workers in the fields, etc. For example, the song called *Commis*, is based on a story that happened during the French occupation: a man imitated the French officials by wearing a pair of trousers, because at that time, only officials were allowed to wear one. It is a metaphor to pass a message to the people: “it is not what you have that makes who you really are. A person should not be judged by his outer appearance.”

After the story, Youssouf demonstrated the song on balafon. He usually began with the melodic theme and the patterns. The melodic theme is the centre of the song played in octave doubling and the patterns are composed of elements extracted from the main melody but polyrhythmic in nature. The Keita brothers define the patterns into two to three short structures that are organized according to their aesthetic preference. The patterns and melody are played superimposed or connected consecutively. Technically speaking, a pattern is made up of two melodic fragments played by the left and right hand, using one mallet in each hand. It requires a high level of independent arm coordination. An example of Boro Demborola, a transcription prepared by Gert Kilian shows the main melody and the patterns (Illustrations 3 and 4):

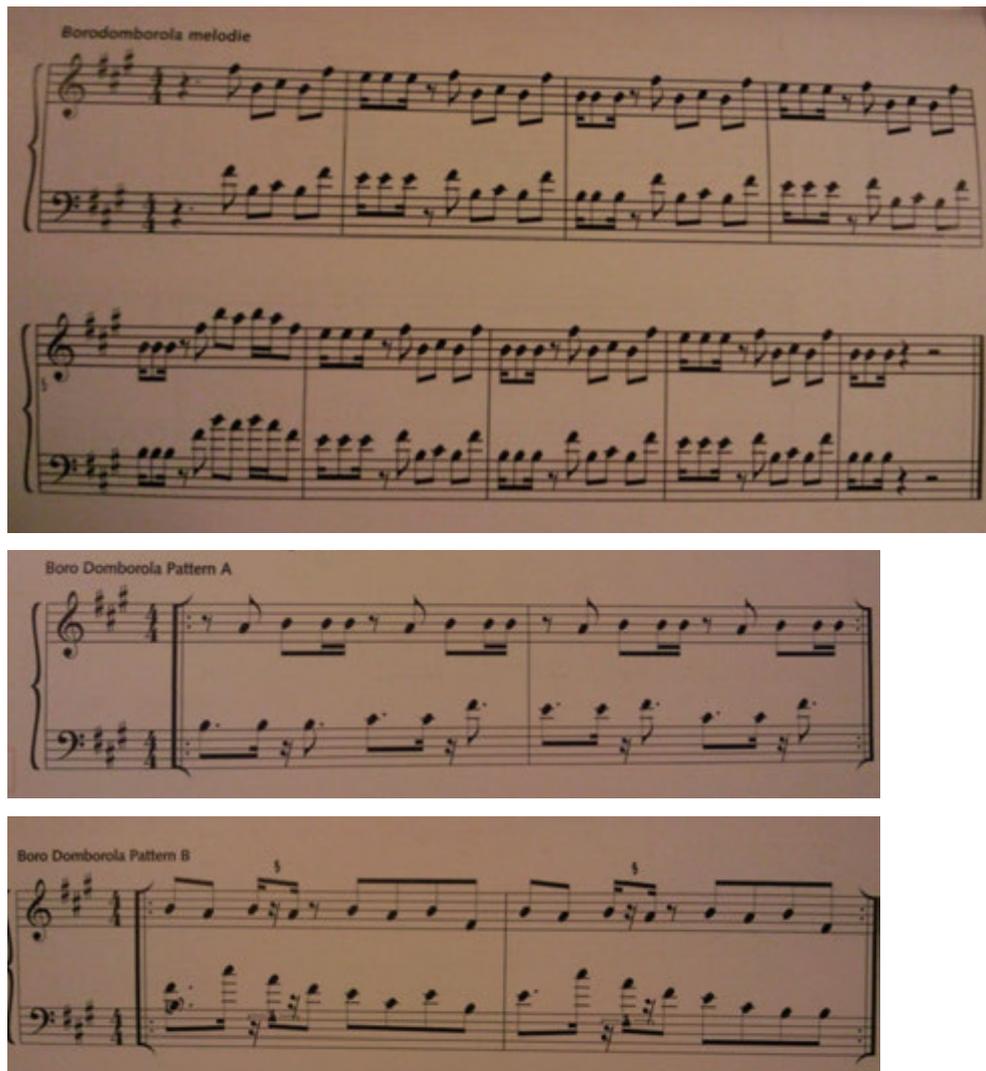


Illustration 3, 4: Western notation of Boro Demborola. Transcription prepared by Kilian (2009) in Dvd booklet “La Balafon”

During the demonstrations, Youssouf and Kassoum expected the students to learn the pitch and timing by listening repeatedly, but this was almost impossible. Their local teaching approach was incomprehensible to most foreign students in the workshops, no matter whether they had an amateur level in music or obtained a professional music diploma. The workshop group had to search constantly for communication methods to be able to understand the music patterns during the demonstrations.

Learning the rhythm

To communicate the musical timing appeared to be the most tangible problem. At first, Youssouf simply played the patterns on the balafon without any references as in

Western music— meter, tempo, pulse, or any other timing system that can help us to define the time lapse between each note or the groove of a phrase. As Gert Kilian observes, he even questions if Youssouf and Kassoum ‘have any rhythm’ because he feels Youssouf was talking ‘rhythm’ based on a different perceptual context. Indeed, the students perceive ‘rhythm’ as a definition of musical events in time, a system that defines pulse, notation, tempo and meter. Youssouf feels a regular beating when he demonstrated a pattern but he was not motivated to teach with it. He simply did not consider the regular beating, which we call pulse as a reference to understand the time in music. He finally demonstrated the music indicating the pulse after one student explained that that was more effective than to demonstrate the patterns holistically and repeatedly.

Independently of these practical demonstrations, a sheer number of scholars continue to contribute to the definition of African musical time. Among them, Kauffman (1980) in “African Rhythm: A reassessment”¹⁶ explains the time phenomenon as ‘common fast beat’, defined as “multi-rhythms that can be reconciled by relating them to a common fast beat.” Waterman (1925) and Hood (1971) have set some preceding concepts to ‘a common fast beat’. The former sees it as ‘metronome sense’¹⁷ and the later defines it as ‘density referent’¹⁸, the existence of a regular pulse.

Youssouf has his own ways to explain the time matter. He illustrates the musical time events by showing the coordination of the hands. Hand coordination becomes an arbitrary parameter to demonstrate the time lapse. As the balafon accompaniment patterns are composed of two superimposed melodic lines (one line played by one mallet per hand), each melodic line controlled by one hand forms a referential common beat to the other. *Rhythmic* feeling is harder to comprehend in a single line melody as there is a weak reference to the *metrical* sense or the *rhythmic* groove.

¹⁶ Kauffman, R., “African Rhythm: A Reassessment” in *The Society for Ethnomusicology*, 24/3 (1980): 393- 415.

¹⁷ Waterman, R. A., “‘Hot’ Rhythm in Negro Music” in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 1/1 (1948): 24-37.

¹⁸ Hood, M., *The Ethnomusicologist*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1971, p.114.

These videos of song Barica can show the complex rhythmic patterns. The first video comprises of the melody and patterns of the song; the second video is the complete version of combining the melody and patterns:

The melody and patterns of song Barica:

<http://youtu.be/sFFMJQNsSL8>

The complete video of song Barica performance:

<http://youtu.be/55JiT8h7A3s>

After the melody and the first pattern, Youssouf always surprised everybody by the second rhythmic pattern of the song. This highly polyrhythmic music contains structures made up of diverse rhythmic patterns, which are ‘conflicting’, yet ‘cooperated’. Chernoff (1979) has shared his experience of playing in a Dagomba and Ewe drumming ensemble:

Adzogno and Zhem [two types of Ewe drum sections consist of kadodo and dondon drums] offer clear visual illustrations of polymeter: the individual rhythms are simple, but the way they are combined can be confusing to Westerners. In spite of what we think, most African music is in some common variety of duple or triple time (like 4/4 or 12/8) and not in the 7/4 or 5/4 that many Westerners have thought they might have heard.¹⁹

Our group still faced another problem as we commonly attempt to force the Western musical perception into the balafon music. The problem is identified in a situation where the students could not recognize the correct superimposition of the melody and the patterns. They failed to recognize the right timing relationship between the patterns, especially due to the fact that a mismatch doesn’t sound inharmonious under the pentatonic tonal framework. It made ensemble rehearsal difficult and indeed the teachers didn’t allow any mistakes and exceptions. The students tried to define the starting note and the sequence of the musical phrases, *i.e.* to locate the first note and count the pulse. This caused confusion because the communication wasn’t based on a

¹⁹ Chernoff, J. M., *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p.47.

common ground. As the patterns are designed to accompany the melodic theme and improvisation, the definite first note or sequential order of a pattern is not the main concern; slight deviations of the demonstrations of Youssouf and Kassoum are even observed. Although the teachers did not give better explanations, the situation seemed to suggest that the students should consider the entire polyphonic structure and the connection points of the patterns and melody— recognize some cues in the music when the music is connected in linear and simultaneous overlapping patterns. Strand (2009) has encountered similar problems in her research of Sambla baan, that she asks to hear the complete polyphonic structure of a repertoire before learning from the small fragmented patterns. She says, “Being unaware of the total composite before learning its constituent elements was my greatest handicap in learning the music, and it was probably the most important difference between my baan education and the traditional Sambla pedagogical model.”²⁰

Mandela employed a similar teaching strategy but slightly different from the Keita brothers. He actively employed *pulse* beating to clarify the temporal relationship, but still, he didn't count pulse and distinguished the time lapse, *i.e.* a crotchet, quaver or semiquaver. He did not use any system to explain the syncopation in his teaching. One distinctive observation is that Mandela linked up the patterns and melody, resulting in long phrases and revealing a loose structure of melody and patterns— in contrast to the Keita brothers and Moussa Dembele.

The melodic materials

Coordination is also used as an explanation for melodic patterns— as with the rhythmic patterns. In the Bobo balafon practice, musicians neither employed names, symbols nor letters to represent the identical-looking wooden slats. There is also no system used to verbalize the pitch materials. Strand (2009) reported that in Sambla baan, the southwest region of Burkina Faso, only fifty kilometers away from Bobo Dioulasso, the wooden slats of the instrument are given names, which may reveal the position of the slat within the scale or its function within a melodic or harmonic context²¹. (Illustration 5)

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.164-173.

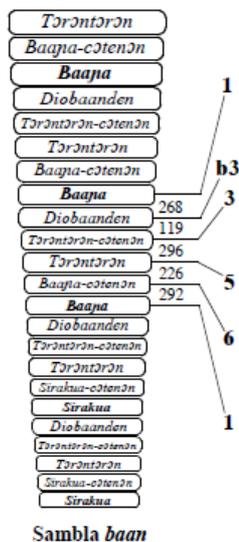


Illustration 5: a diagram of the naming of the wooden slats of a Sambla baan in local language. The numbers on the right is the pitch degrees in a Sambla scale. (Strand 2009)

Bobo balafon musicians do not name melodic material. They either sing the pitch they would like to express or play the wooden slat. Sometimes they describe the physical distance on the keyboard by saying the number of wooden slats that the hand has to space out for the next note. When the consecutive *do* to *re* should be played, they would say “the next key on the left (le bois à gauche)”, but for *do* to *sol*, which is spaced out by 3 keys, they would ask you to jump over two wooden slats or show you on the balafon. These difficulties led me to metaphorically compare playing a melody on a balafon to two checks jumping and joining different points tactically on a game board.

From the first workshop onwards, I have adapted to learn and memorize the music by listening and observing the movement, *solfège* is no necessary tool for communication during the lesson. The students have found different methods to represent and record a song: Gert Kilian and others who are acquainted with Western music notation still have stuck *solfège* name tags on the balafon and use the notation

system for transcription. Paul Nas, a balafon teacher from Holland has devised a notation system using symbols to identify pitch and grid squares to represent timing (Illustration 6)²². This is a close reminiscent of the Time Unit Box System (TUBS) developed from Philip Harlan in 1962 (Illustration 7). In short, the TUBS is a simple system for notating events that happen over a period. This system is mostly used for notating rhythms and is widely adopted by African ethnomusicologists, for example Koetting (1970) in his analysis of West African drum ensemble music²³. The notation consists of one or more rows of boxes; each box represents a fixed unit of time. Blank boxes indicate that nothing happens during that interval, while a mark in a box indicates that an event occurs at the start of that time interval. Supplementary signs indicate the technical skills of each instrument. The notation system from “Die Stimme des Balafon”²⁴ is another source of inspiration to Nas’s notation.

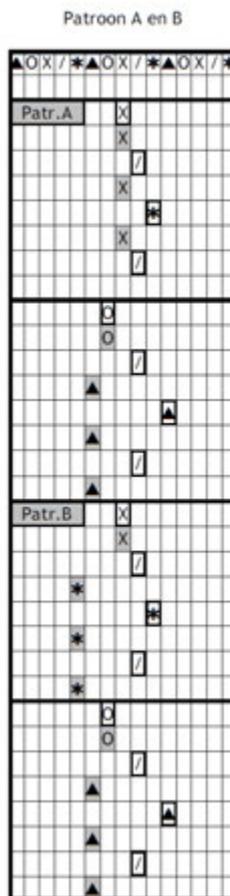


Illustration 6: transcription of the song *Nambara Mogo* by Paul Nas

²² Nas, P., transcription of song *Nambara Mogo*.

²³ Koetting, J., “Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music” in *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, 1 (1970): 115-46.

²⁴ Egger, A. & Hema, M., *Die Stimme des Balafon*, Hamburg: Schell Music, 2006, p.34.

Movement patterns represent the music in two dimensions: the vertical movement in the air represents time lapse and the horizontal spatial movement represents the melodic pattern. The role of movement in learning balafon music should be emphasized, next to learning the music via listening and imitation. By relying on notation, these authentic practices that the African musicians endorse disappear or at least are diminished. Godøy (2010) in “Gestural Affordances of Musical Sound” has also discussed on splitting music into a ‘score’ part and a ‘performance’ part due to the use of notation, he says:

Western musical culture has been able to create highly complex organizations of musical sound with large-scale forms and large ensembles, thanks to the development of notation... we could claim that Western musical thinking often tends to ignore the fact that any sonic event is actually included in a *sound-producing gesture*, a gesture that starts before, and often ends after, the sonic event of any single tone or group of tones. In other words, Western musical thought has not been well equipped for thinking the gestural-contextual inclusion of tone-events in music...²⁵

Coordination as a vehicle in communication

An early theory suggested by von Hornbostel (1928) has shed light on the investigation of coordination by stressing the physicality of the movement. The controversial theory was further discussed by Blacking (1955) in “Some Notes on a Theory of African Rhythm Advanced by Erich von Hornbostel”²⁶ as following:

African rhythm is ultimately founded on drumming. Drumming can be replaced by hand-clapping or the xylophone; what really matters is the act of beating... Each single beating movement is again twofold: the muscles are strained and released, the hand is lifted and dropped. Only the second phase is stressed acoustically... This implies an essential contrast between our rhythmic conception and the African’s; we proceed from hearing, they from

²⁵ Godøy, R. I., “Gestural Affordances of Musical Sound” in *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning*, ed. by Godøy, R. I. & Leman, M., New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 109-110.

²⁶ Blacking, J., “Some Notes on a Theory of African Rhythm Advanced by Erich von Hornbostel” in *African Music*, 1/2 (1955).

motion.²⁷

Kubik (1979) in “Pattern Perception and Recognition in African Music” has conceptualized the distinction between physical movements and hearing, which he sometimes denotes the ‘motional pattern’ and the ‘sonic pattern’ in musical performance. He readily compares the phenomenon to Western music:

In Western music, the movements of a musician playing his instrument generally have meaning only in terms of the sonic result, in African music, patterns of movement are in themselves a source of pleasure, regardless of whether they come to life in sound in their entirety, partly, or not at all. In Western music movement is a means for producing auditive complexes, whereas in African music it can be self-sufficient. In such music auditory complexes may even only be an, [even though] important, by-product of motional process.²⁸

Following but also complementary to the arguments from Hornbostel, Blacking and Kubik, our field observations have given new evidence to answer the central question of this research paper: “What is the contrast in the musical approach between the Africans and Europeans? Are African musicians indeed governed by motion, while the Europeans are governed by hearing?” As discussed above, rhythmical and melodic materials are communicated through the imitation of the movements of the arms, next to aural imitation.

As observations of lessons and rehearsals reveal, African musicians barely employ notational or verbal method or system to communicate musical matters. The only method observed is that Youssouf broke up lengthy melodic patterns into groups of five notes, so the students could digest the long phrase easier and learn the melody and patterns with both hands together as he prefers. To separate the melodic layers played by two hands is not the proper learning approach. In contrary, the balafon practice also develops an advanced independence coordination technique which is not

²⁷ Von Hornbostel, E. M., “African Negro Music” in *Africa*, 1/1 (1928): 30-62.

²⁸ Kubik, G., “Pattern Perception and Recognition in African Music” in *The Performing Arts: Music and Dance*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979, pp. 221-250.

emphasized in the marimba practice: each hand holds one mallet, the left hand plays the repetitive skeleton phrases, the right hand can perform improvisation on the rhythmic and melodic themes, or vice versa. A kinetic approach involving the coordination of both hands seems to be at the heart of learning the practice. Gert Kilian named it ‘two- ways coordination’, a term borrowed from the jazz drums technique. A video of ‘two-ways coordination’ taught by Youssouf during the workshop:

<http://youtu.be/5AsQn1iM3hE>

The importance of coordination is also observed in the teaching of Youssouf of his son at his atelier. The video shows us how he teaches his son some new balafon patterns. The whole process apparently needs no verbal explanation, only the beautiful balafon sound is heard and the physical movement was seen on the screen. The video of Youssouf teaching his son:

<http://youtu.be/qAUw7ISZ6sw>

One extra observation of performance practice can shed light to answer the central question. When the song falls beyond the vocal range of the singers in a rehearsal or performance, the ensemble is asked to *transpose* the music one note up or down. The same was asked to the students in the lesson of learning the song *Kebini*. Youssouf instructed the group to *transpose* the composition from the original starting note pitch F# to pitch A— of course, these are the western designations of pitch. As the balafon is tuned in A- pentatonic scale, *transposition* to pitch A changes the interval structure that is present in the original composition, therefore, the *transposed* music became a new repertoire for the students of non-African culture, while the rhythm remains unchanged. For the African musicians the transposition seems to be an easy move.

Song *Kebini* pattern A, original version (start with pitch F#):

<http://youtu.be/It3HQu1LP6A>

Song *Kebini* pattern A, *transposed* version (start with pitch A):

<http://youtu.be/xq03Qu01C9s>

In fact, this is an application of the motoric embodied pattern trained by practicing the same set of coordinated movements. The problem is indeed quickly solved if the music is considered as a ‘movement score’— and thus from the coordination movements of *Kenibi*. As a western educated performer, I had to move to this kinetic approach. I succeeded in employing the same set of embodied movements and started the pattern on the wooden slat of pitch A instead of F#. It was a struggle to erase the original melody resonating in my ears but the result was quickly approved by Youssouf. However, he could not accept that it was an unmanageable task to other students; again, he expected the students to swiftly work out the *transposition* concept. Embodied movements are not studied in the same way as precomposed scores for Western classical musicians, and clearly, African musicians made use of the kinetic ability as an extra technical possibility to adapt to narrower vocal range. Besides, the *transposition* practice opens a new ground for investigating music perception in ethnomusicology: are the African practice and the Western on one line for the definition of ‘the same melody’? The African musicians considered that the pitch A tune sounds the same as the F# tune. The new version is certainly a well recognized tune for the teachers from past performances and rehearsals; but familiarity should not be the crucial reason to explain why the balafon music found the two melodic patterns contain no difference.

Holistic approach in pedagogy

Balafon musicians pass down repertoire and musical knowledge without the aid of notation or system. Opposite to Western music, balafon considers music in its entirety, disobliged to analysis or dissection. Listening and imitation are the basic methods in learning. Interestingly, these are sustained by the notion of ‘feeling’.

‘Feeling’ is a frequent term used by the teachers in lesson— to feel the time distance between notes, to feel the tempo, to feel the cooperation with other instrumental parts in the ensemble, to listen the melody and imitate. Next to listening and imitation, body coordination becomes one method to communicate timing concept. It is used to explain the syncopation between the melodic lines and the counterpoint over the complete structure.

Styles and articulation are then discussed by means of coordination. During the workshops and lessons, Youssouf and Moussa used simple explanations to tell a two-note left and right hand alternation in the song *Commis*, as ‘play the two notes nearly together’, which we have perceived as a western snare drum technique similar to ‘fla’.



Illustration 9: The notation of a fla pattern (or flam) of the percussion rudiment

As such, holism is applied to describe the pedagogical approach in balafon music. A general definition of holism in Oxford Dictionary is “the theory that parts of a whole are in intimate interconnection, such that they cannot exist independently of the whole, or cannot be understood without reference to the whole, which is thus regarded as greater than the sum of its parts.” Holistic approach is thus defined as “to relate to or concerned with whole or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts.”²⁹ Holism is observed as the principle in balafon music rather than analysis, which is readily observed in the communication of music in pedagogy and performance. It relies on auditory and visual imitation instead of notation and system.

In Western music, holism is advocated by some pedagogical methods, but it certainly doesn’t prevail in the mainstream education. The Suzuki Method emphasizes learning by ear over reading music notation in the beginning learning stage. Suzuki's observation was that in language acquisition, a child learns to speak before learning to read. Therefore, a beginner is expected to memorize all solo repertoires, even after he begins to use sheet music as a tool to learn new pieces. There is no formal plan or prescribed materials for introducing music theory and reading into the curriculum; this is left to the judgment of the teacher. Learning music by holistic approach is compared to how children manage a language. By barely imitating their parents speaking without knowing the reading and grammar skills, children could make faster progress than an adult who follows a curriculum. As such, a question is posed to the

²⁹ ‘Holistic’ in *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*.

Western music pedagogy: should notation and music analysis systems possess such an indispensable role in music learning and communication? Are we ignoring the value of such primary learning method and over-bounding ourselves to systems and notation?

We can perhaps adapt holistic principles to enhance the quality of Western music education. One possible example can be drawn from performing the ensemble work “Drumming” composed by Steve Reich (1971)³⁰. Ensemble groups often face challenges to achieve unison music interpretation due to individual musicianship embedded in each member. As in “Drumming”, the rhythm notation suggests numerous possible rhythmic interpretations. If musicians rely on notation as a main medium of communication, diverse rhythmical articulations will probably result in the performance. However, before the premiere of “Drumming”, Reich has taught his 12-persons ensemble group the music without using score and afterwards, the work was performed world-wide without a conductor or coach on stage. It is also felt that African balafon ensembles have a comparatively better ambience in collaboration. It is hypothesized that the collective principle in holistic learning is a possible enhancement of reaching unison between musicians.

Reflections

While the identity of a marimba performer is emphasized in this research paper, the question emerges concerning the educational and cultural patterns that are the roots from of the musician’s unique artistic exploration. How far can I go as a performer? Artistic idiosyncrasy is embedded in this field investigation and has ruled out methodologies that may otherwise interest musicians of other domains. Being a composer, theorist or historian can lead to all sorts of research, resulting various music-making processes, investigation and artistic outputs. Consider the case when such a project sharing similar initiatives would be conducted by a composer. Due to the employment, and to different backgrounds, different artistic output will be

³⁰ Steve Reich traveled to Ghana in the 1970s and returned to the United States, full of inspirations from his lessons with Ghanaian traditional drummer Gideon Alorwoyie, and ready to write down his ideas into a completely new work—Drumming. But Reich did not notate the work as most composers usually do, he was probably influenced by the oral tradition that he had experienced with the Ghanaian drum master— he only jotted down most of the rhythmic patterns in short hand in his notebook, he then taught the members of his ensemble how to play the work during rehearsals.

yielded. Nketia (1985) has carefully described the different methods of integrating objectivity and experience between a scholar and a performer: the former approaches music as an object of observation, analysis and scholarly interpretation; while a performer approaches music as a medium of creativity and expression as well as an object of aesthetic interpretation.³¹ Nketia has defined the role of a composer-ethnomusicologist which is found relevant to that of a performer- researcher:

[He] must wear two hats, for he operates as an artist when his research activities provide special knowledge and experience which he absorbs, reflects upon, translates, and presents in a creative form, and as a scholar when he presents this experience and knowledge in a descriptive, analytical and interpretive discourse which integrates the results of his empirical studies and his musical experience.³²

Considering myself as a western classically- trained musician, can I truly reveal the principles of performance philosophy in West African music? As a performer under Western influence, a filter needs to be permanently present when working on the broad music knowledge of Africa. The research is unlikely either to provoke an essentialist perspective or a bias on the genre, while a ‘prejudicial’ view of a marimba performer can bring new perspectives to my performance domain. As often emphasized in hermeneutics, prejudice is not considered as discrimination to other races, but respected as an initiation to subjective thoughts or interpretation³³. But prejudice should not stand in the way of understanding the music. What I exactly mean is “to put in other person’s shoes”— to learn the foreign genre by observing and participating in their local practice. It sounds impossible, but observing the genre from our own music perception can’t reveal the true side of balafon music. Stone (1985) suggests in her research of the Liberia Kpelle to analyze the music “from the angle of the African musicians”³⁴. The idiom has its intelligence and research through

³¹ Nketia, J. H. K., “Integrating Objectivity and Experience in Ethnomusicological Studies” in *Ethnomusicology and African Music (vol.1)*, California: Afram Publications, 2005, pp. 95-6.

³² *Ibid.*, p.96.

³³ Some reference of hermeneutics: Gadamer, H., ed. & trans. Linge, D. E., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, CA: University of California Press, 2004. White, H., “Interpretation in History” in *New Literary History*, 4/2(1973): 281-314.

³⁴ Stone, R. M., “In Search of Time in African Music” in *Music Theory Spectrum*, 7/1 (1985): 139-148.

learning is proved to be an essential tool. By practicing the balafon in these African educational settings, I (re)learn to be a (different) performer.

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Score

Nas, P., Transcription of song *Nambara Mogo*. (unpublished)