

My Introduction to the Gyl

BY VALERIE NARANJO

As a profession, music is as difficult as it is fun. Practically every nation of many “folks” has musical spokespieces—instruments unique to that nation. Of those spokespieces are percussion instruments. Therefore, being a well-rounded percussionist in today’s popular music scene is a formidable challenge. We have great examples of percussionists who have met that challenge: Max Roach, Tony Williams, Chris Lamb, and Evelyn Glennie to name just four.

Understanding the links between percussion instruments all over the world is not only challenging and fun, it’s necessary. My particular interest is solo marimba.

I grew up in the American Southwest. My father is Southern Ute and our family played music together during visits for as long as I can remember. The ideal of music is: It’s fun. It’s available to everyone. It’s a respect-worthy way in which people fuse their energy and dispel the delusion of separateness.

In a relatively small area of West Africa, a nation called Dagara has been cultivating solo marimbaphone music for centuries. Words like “polyrhythmic” and “polymetric” are not in these soloists’ vocabulary, yet in their rendition of traditional tunes, they set a soulful and spellbinding example of right hand/left hand independence. Improvising over a jazz standard is a practice they probably have not heard about, yet their format of playing created the concept. Alone, a marimbaphonist plays bass, comps chords, and blows over the changes while the drummer (on kuar or ganga drum) keeps time.

The gyl (pronounced JEE-l or JEE-lee) is their marimbaphone based on the pentatonic scale. Its fourteen keys span almost three octaves, and it is played with two large beaters held between the first and second fingers to allow for a huge dynamic range. Gyls are played in pairs during funerals, and recreationally as a solo instrument accompanied by kuar, a hand drum made from a calabash gourd.

I was introduced to African mallet mu-

sic at the University of Colorado. A Ghanaian doctoral composition student named Joseph directed a weekly workshop on Ewe drumming for the percussionists in the department. I was taken by his marimba playing, and although Joseph disclaimed “real abilities” as a percussionist, he brought out a different timbre and used the instrument in a unique way. He was directly in touch with a marimba language I’d never heard before. The impression stayed with me.

As a graduate student studying with Gordon Stout, I researched various keyboard transcriptions. I consulted members of the piano department with questions like, “How do you approach Bach’s ‘Well-Tempered Clavier,’ knowing that Bach never actually wrote for piano?” Purists had a simple answer: “You study harpsichord.”

That advice begged a question. If I am looking for keyboard music as a source of idiomatic marimba transcriptions, why not look to the predecessor of the marimba itself—the dozens of styles of marimbas found all over the African continent? I was familiar with marimba bands from Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique, and the balafon ensembles found in Cameroonian Catholic churches.

Yet, I wondered, does there exist a style of solo polyphonic marimba music from the African tradition?

While combing through record shops in Harlem, I found a recording of Ghanaian gyl master Kakraba Lobi. In order to learn more about this mysterious instrument and the people who created it, I took my first journey to Ghana to seek out Kakraba. Traveling first to Accra, the capital city, I continued on to his homeland—the Upper West of Ghana. While I was not able to locate Kakraba (he was in Japan), I was able to stumble nose-first into the Dagari nation’s largest gyl festival, Kobine.

I traveled from Accra to the Upper West capital Wa alone (a grueling eighteen hours on a crowded state transport bus) and was escorted to Lawra, the home of Kobine by one of Ghana’s Arts Council officers, Mr. Donzie, who had performed extensively in the



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United States. "What is your ethnic background?" he asked.

"Native American."

"Where did you grow up?"

"In Colorado. The town is 120 miles north of Santa Fe."

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed. "You will like it here. You are just like us here, and our Lawra town is just like your Santa Fe!"

"He's being so kind," I thought. "Trying to make me feel at home half a globe's distance away."

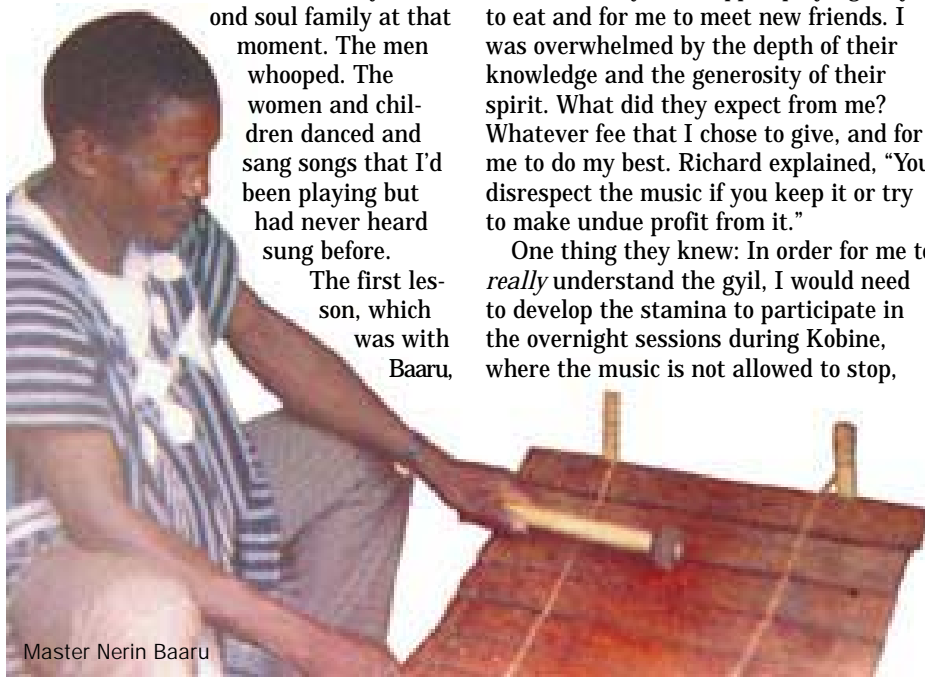
He was right. My first impressions of Lawra mirrored childhood images of my own home. Reddish dust flew into the air every time a pickup truck drove by (which was infrequent). Most of the houses were mud brick. Older women shucked corn by tossing big shallow basketfuls of dry corn into the air, which allowed the breeze to blow away the chaff.

Later that morning I was taken to the compound (extended family home) of the master gyl player and builder of the region, Newin Baaru. A polite yet probing interview ensued. Baaru needs to ensure that anyone who wishes to play gyl is truly dedicated to it and is the kind of spirit that can "carry" the music, since to the Dagari, the spirit and intention of the musician can affect either a healing or destructive energy.

I was then given a pair of mallets and a gyl was placed in front of me. I could then show to them the result of five years of struggle and study from recordings without a teacher. I united with my second soul family at that

moment. The men whooped. The women and children danced and sang songs that I'd been playing but had never heard sung before.

The first lesson, which was with Baaru,



Master Nerin Baaru

began early that evening at the compound of Vida Tenney-Dunia, who took it upon herself to host me. Baaru walked into the yard, set up the gyl, sat behind it and began to play a basic (yet complicated to me) Dagara dance song. I expected him to stop at some point and say, "Okay, you start this way." No. One learns to play from Baaru (and any other traditional master) by observing, and observing some more. I remember learning stomp songs (Native American recreational songs) that way.

When enough time had passed, he pointed to my left hand with his jaw. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Without stopping the music, I took over the left-hand line, later the right-hand line. Within minutes I was exhausted. I stopped playing. He got up, disturbed, picked up the gyl and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"You stopped."

"Ah, but I didn't mean to stop for the evening. I just needed to take a break!"

"Tek brek?" he demanded. One of the youngsters translated the American phrase "Take a break."

"No, no, no, no, no," he said, shaking his head shamefully. "When you play gyl here you do not Tek Brek! You must be strong, strong!" He left.

Indeed the phrase "Take a break" left my vocabulary. By the next morning I had three teachers: Baaru, Richard Na-Ile and P.K. Derry. We stopped playing only to eat and for me to meet new friends. I was overwhelmed by the depth of their knowledge and the generosity of their spirit. What did they expect from me? Whatever fee that I chose to give, and for me to do my best. Richard explained, "You disrespect the music if you keep it or try to make undue profit from it."

One thing they knew: In order for me to *really* understand the gyl, I would need to develop the stamina to participate in the overnight sessions during Kobine, where the music is not allowed to stop,



Author with Mr. Donzie at the compound of Vida Donia

and where a gyl player may play for hours at a time. A far cry from my first twenty-minute lesson!

KOBINE

Kobine (pronounced KO-bee-nay) is a four-day, three night pre-harvest festival that takes place in Lawra on either the last weekend of September or the first weekend of October. It is considered to be the place to hear the finest gyl players and composers.

The day before the festival's official opening, a hush of anticipation falls over the town. One by one, music and dance groups arrive (you hear them before you see them), and as they stop in Lawra's transport yard they jump out of the old flatbed trucks or decrepit busses playing, singing, and wearing their finest traditional dress. In a few hours, Lawra is transformed from a sleepy little village to a noisy, colorful, rich display of joy and beauty.

Pito (pronounced PEA-too) is a home-made millet beer. During Kobine, residents' backyards become huge Pito bars and outdoor food stands serving sumptuous stews and dishes. Merchants set up shop and display their wares—everything from simple tools to lavish works of art. The sound of gyl is constant.

The first official event of Kobine is the Greeting of the Chief. Each visiting chief



Groups parade in front of the spectators

and his court musicians travel in a procession to the palace of Lawra's Chief Karbo, where greetings are exchanged. Meanwhile, the public assembles on Lawra's main road for the final Grand Procession to the festival grounds. In an enormous pageant the entire party moves to a song sung by the women. The public takes its place on the west and south sides of the festival field, the chiefs and their courts take their seats on the north side, and the music/dance groups (at least one to represent each village) continue to parade around the perimeter of the field so that everyone can see them "up close."

After the announcement of Kobine by the Hoori-Hoori Man (an elder musician who uses a calabash flute), an hour of speeches, and the dramatic re-telling of the origins of Kobine, the real festival begins. For the next four or five hours the gyl groups are in official competition. One after another they go onto the field for a designated ten minutes and "show their stuff." The group is generally one or two gyl players and two to six kuar players. The singers/dancers, each playing metal shakers bound to the feet and a cast iron clapper in one hand, move in a circle around them. At dusk, the groups

assemble informally and continue, usually all night.

The following afternoon, the competition continues, the finalists having been chosen by a panel of judges. As the competition becomes fiercer, one experiences a finer and finer display of strength and virtuosity. The "throwing of ashes" in honor of ancestors is the solemn ceremony that closes Kobine on Sunday morning.

GHANA'S GYL CONCERT SOLOIST

I returned to Ghana the following September after receiving a letter from Kakraba inviting me to study with him.

Kakraba Lobi is regarded at home and abroad as the nation's foremost gyl master. Having grown up with the instrument in his family, he perfected his art while still a teenager. A vibrant, youthful man in his late fifties, Kakraba has taken the art of gyl playing, composing, and improvising to new levels. At times, he improvises both left- and right-hand lines simultaneously, yet in different meters (e.g., 6/8 in the left hand, 4/4 in the right). The music is astounding, as if I am watching one man play yet hearing two. Now a well-in-demand concert soloist who performs all over the world, Kakraba is a Ghanaian living legend, considered in his homeland to be the world's gyl spokesperson.

It took an afternoon and a guide to find Kakraba's main house. After meeting with this great master we set up an appointment.

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The committee seeks a wide variety of Cage's percussion music to be presented, encompassing all of his compositional techniques and philosophies, from (ca.) 1936-1992. Suggested subjects for performers and/or scholars include Cage's use of serial techniques or the square root formula, polyrhythms, primitive electronics, prepared piano, found objects, chance procedures, silence, etc.

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The author with group from Jirapa, Ghana who later tested her Gyl playing stamina

“Do you wish to learn in the traditional manner?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” I replied.

He growled in response. Did I know what I would be in for?

The next morning, we met for the traditional initiation libation, a short ceremony that honors the masters who have passed. In traditional pedagogy it is a given that those who have died are still with us, and will assist us if we acknowledge them.

Kakraba chose the space where I would study and placed the gyl there. He then broke the seal on a bottle of fine gin, which he had instructed me to bring for the occasion, and poured two drops on each of the four corners of the keyboard. He then poured a drop on each of the beaters and poured a generous helping of gin in two glasses: one for himself and one for me.

I recited a traditional prayer; he did the same. Then it was “down the hatch.”

He immediately began a session on how to “warm the gyl,” which is the playing of introductory phrases that all traditional players do when they first approach an instrument. This music, based on spoken language, connects the musician with his or her musical masters, living and dead.

My first teachers avoided this painstaking process. Kakraba began with it.

The phrases were lengthy, complicated, and based on a language that I didn’t yet understand. Furthermore, I was very drunk. I had two choices: to embarrass myself by relying on my intellect, or to ask for help from those experienced experts we had just prayed to. I did the latter. To my astonishment and to Kakraba’s smiling nod, I began to warm the gyl.

That was the first of many amazing experiences studying with gyl master Kakraba Lobi. We are presently completing a collection of marimba transcriptions of his gyl music in hopes of helping to fill a space in marimba literature for traditional solo music from the African continent.

THE MUSIC

Gyl is “the voice of the people” and its range incorporates the vocal range of those who sing with it. The tunes themselves are usually short and repeat a parable or observation.

The study of gyl music provides a key to idiomatic capabilities specific to mallet instruments. For example, marimba beautifully expresses what drumset master Kenwood Dennard has coined “Metadependence,” which occurs when two or more interdependent lines interlock in dialogue between the right and left hand.

The construction and playing of the gyl are regarded as a single art, the masters of which hold a respected post. Although truly mastering the art can take most of a lifetime, all of the men in a community are expected to be able to play at least a few simple tunes. Women have also recently begun to play.



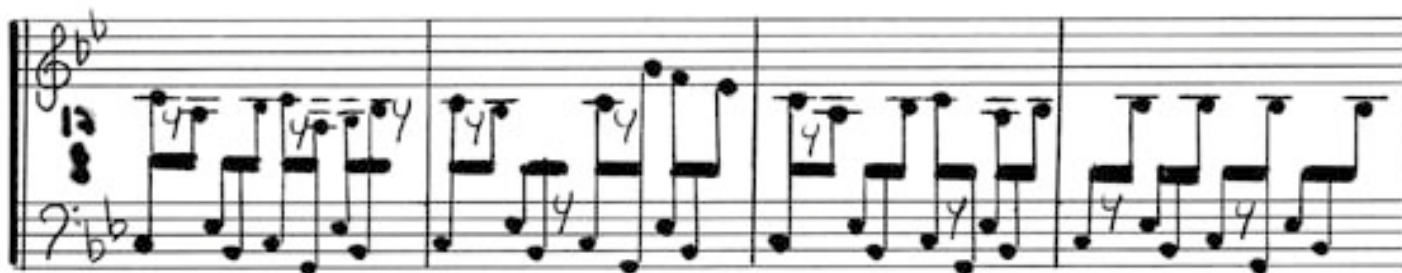
Kakraba Lobi, Ghana’s premier gyl master at one of his homes

A "simple tune" is a melody in the right hand with a bass/harmonic accompaniment in the left:

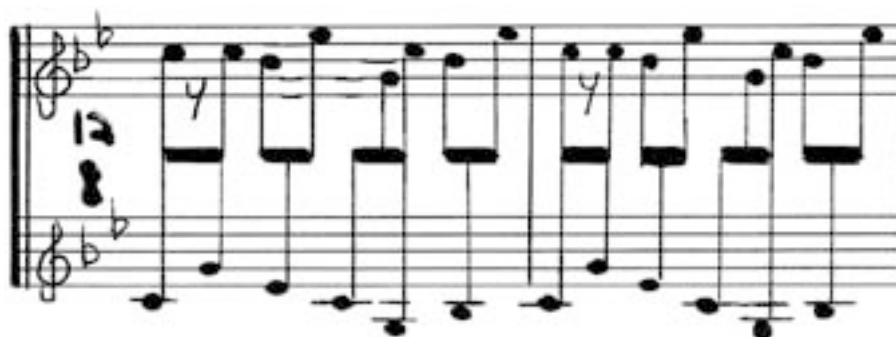


When people get together to sing and dance, the more skilled players are called upon to play melodies when appropriate, and to improvise in two ways:

1. Right-hand lines based on the melody:



2. Marking the dancers (following their moves) with repeated two- to six-note lines in the right hand:



Since Dagaris sing and dance simultaneously, often the distinction between the two is slight.

For each rhythmic style, advanced players have a vocabulary of left-hand lines that they use in response to the energy of the dance, and a working understanding of (1) constant noting and (2) call-and-response within one hand.

Constant Noting is the practice of placing a note in a specific part of the bar (in Western terms) and playing everything within that parameter. Dark notes denote a pattern of repeated G's; square notes depict repeated D's:



Call-and-Response within one hand is simply that, with a one-hand “call” played on a specific range of the instrument, and its response played on another.

In the right hand:

Handwritten musical notation for the right hand, showing call-and-response patterns in a 12/8 time signature. The notation is on a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music consists of four measures. The first measure has a '12' above the staff. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed pairs. There are handwritten 'y' marks above several notes, indicating specific articulation or fingerings. The piece ends with a double bar line.

In the left hand:

Handwritten musical notation for the left hand, showing call-and-response patterns in an 8/8 time signature. The notation is on a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music consists of four measures. The first measure has an '8' above the staff. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed pairs. There are handwritten 'y' marks above several notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

These techniques, of course, can be combined in either or both hands simultaneously in a single meter:

Handwritten musical notation for the right hand, showing call-and-response patterns in an 8/8 time signature. The notation is on a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music consists of four measures. The first measure has an '8' above the staff. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed pairs. There are handwritten 'y' marks above several notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Handwritten musical notation for the left hand, showing call-and-response patterns in an 8/8 time signature. The notation is on a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music consists of four measures. The first measure has an '8' above the staff. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed pairs. There are handwritten 'y' marks above several notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

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Handwritten musical notation for a piece in 12/8 and 4/4 time signatures. The top staff is in 12/8, and the bottom staff is in 4/4. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and notes.

Other available techniques are the use of open and "dead" strokes, and the striking of the bar with the mallet shaft. In the following section of "Kpanlogo," these techniques create the illusion of two voices within a single line:

Handwritten musical notation for "Kpanlogo" showing techniques for creating two voices. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and notes, with some notes marked with 'x' to indicate specific techniques.

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The gyil master can improvise using any of the aforementioned, track a dancer, support a singer, change key at will, play for long periods of time with no break—and knows how to construct the instruments. She/he is truly a world-class artist.

CONCLUSION

I was taken to Ghana because of the magic of the gyil. My experiences taught me that this quality in the music is a reflection of the depth and beauty of the nation that creates it.

In Ghana I've never been regarded as a stranger or an outsider, and whenever I've taken an opportunity to explain my intentions, my listener becomes my comrade willing to help in any way possible.

I am indebted to many: To the people of Lawra, especially Paramount Chief Naa Abeifa Karbo III who made his court available to ensure my comfort, and made a decree that women be able to play gyil. To Kakraba for being so strict yet loving, and for rearranging his busy schedule to accommodate me. To Robert Levin, for generous hours of advice, and to all the Ghanaian people, who remind me of something that I learned when I was a child: Richness of the human spirit coupled with the natural richness of the

environment create the most valuable things in life. Great music is one of those things.

Valerie Dee Naranjo is an instrumentalist, vocalist, and composer who explores the social and spiritual properties of indigenous percussion music. A Native American (Ute) from her father's heritage, Naranjo has recorded and collaborated with composers and musicians on five continents, including festivals in Grahamstown (South Africa), Edinburgh (Scotland), Katsuka (Japan), and Mexico City. In Ghana in 1988 she effected a chiefly decree that women be allowed for the first time to play Gyil, and in 1996 she took a first-place award in Ghana's Kobine Festival (the first non-Ghanaian ever to do so). She arranged for and performs in Broadway's *The Lion King*, performs in and arranged for NBC's *Saturday Night Live* band, and has recorded and performed with The Philip Glass Ensemble, David Byrne, Tori Amos, Selena, Airto, and the international percussion ensemble Megadrums, which includes Milton Cardona, Zakir Hussein, and Glen Velez.

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