

Famoro Dioubate and the Bala from Guinea, West Africa

By Michael Markus

The balafon, a West African xylophone, is a very old instrument dating back more than 800 years. First made in the times of the Original Mande region of West Africa (present-day Guinea, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, and Mali), the Susu (Sosso) bala is played primarily in Guinea and considered the first instrument of the Mande Jeli (“Griot” in French). The Griot are the oral historians for the culture, responsible for knowing the history, lineage, and traditions of each family name within the country. This is why the Griot is respected and called upon by all for important occasions, celebrations, and holidays. The Griot are the keepers of the history and culture. Traditionally, the repertoire of the bala from Guinea is vast, containing hundreds of songs and folklore. Although anyone can learn to play the bala, to be a Griot, one must be born into it.

Handmade from Hare Wood, a very dense hardwood found in Guinea, West Africa, the bars are smoked and cured, then cut and shaved (similar to that of the marimba) in order to obtain their pitch and durability. The balafon is amplified by small gourds underneath the keys, and traditionally have small layers of pressed spider webs over holes to create a unique buzzing sound (although now plastic and paper can be used). This gives more resonance and sustain to the music.

The bala has 21 notes and uses a seven-note scale with bars tied to a bamboo frame. Traditionally, each village will have its own tuning; however, in more modern times, people in cities are using more major Western scales, like D, C, or G Major. This allows them to travel and play with other musicians as well as other instruments such as guitar, piano, electric bands, etc. While the bala can be played in any ensemble configuration, it is traditionally found in an ensemble with three to four other bala players plus a dundun (bass drum) and djembe to help give rhythm



FAMORO DIOUBATE

foundation to the music. One can also see singers, the African flute, and the Kora (21-string Africa Harp) in the ensemble.

Professional players use a variety of techniques, including press tones, extreme rhythmic independence, dexterity, and stick control to produce a vast array of sounds. Although it looks like a simple keyboard, the bala takes years of training. When compared to a piano or marimba, which has accidentals on a separate manual, the balafon has all bars on the same manual, so it is easy to become lost when moving around the instrument.

Famoro Dioubate was born in 1965 in Conakry, Guinea as a Griot, and is the grandson of El Hadj Djelli Sory Kouyate, a living legend of the Mandeng balafon. Famoro was the understudy of his grandfather in the Ensemble Instrumental National (National ensemble of Guinea) and routinely performed for the President and visiting foreign dignitaries, as well as a multitude of musical engagements and collaboration. He was a member of the famous Mory Kante's orchestra for the performances and recording of the "Traditional Symphonie."

In addition, Famoro is a traditional musician, steeped in the folklore, and he plays more modern music, collaborating with musicians from all over the world. He composes, arranges, produces, and records for others as well as his own projects. Living in New York City since the late 1990s, Famoro is in high demand as a free-lance musician, playing everywhere from nightclubs to Carnegie Hall.

Famoro will give a clinic at PASIC 2024 joined by other Wula Drum artists, including Master Drummer M'bemba Bangoura, Fara Camara, and Michael Markus. During the clinic, Famoro will play traditional music from Guinea, demonstrate and explain the unique techniques used, the basics of the instrument and nuances for learning it, as well as the rich vast variety of songs and rhythms applied. Please join us! [PN](#)

KEYBOARD

STEVE SHAPIRO Keyboard Clinic/Performance — Studio Tips and Techniques for Mallet Players

This clinic will cover all the bases when it comes to what mallet players might need to know when entering the studio. Topics will include playing techniques, session do's and don'ts, gear and mallet tips, mics, mixing, audio processing, and some revealing stories from the sessions of some well-known recordings (with listening). Steve has decades of professional experience as a session mallet player and a producer. He's worked with some of the best recording engineers in the business and has expert knowledge of the technical aspects of recording and mixing.

Steve Shapiro is a veteran New York City studio vibraphonist and composer. He has recorded with such artists as Steely Dan, Ornette Coleman, Phil Collins, Spyro Gyra, Whitney Houston, They Might Be Giants, Pat Martino, and many others. An accomplished producer/arranger, his work has appeared in hundreds of high-profile projects for television, film, and Disney. Steve has been a pioneer using audio and MIDI technology with the vibraphone since the 1980s, and has developed a unique voice inspired by contemporary electric keyboards. He has released seven recordings as a leader.

WORLD

SAMUEL TORRES World Clinic — Hands of Fire: Igniting Latin Percussion Dynamics and Control

The clinic will delve into understanding the unique rhythmic structures found in various Latin American traditions. This might involve exploring clave patterns, polyrhythms, and specific rhythmic feels associated with Latin Jazz. You'll learn how to use percussion as a bridge to connect different musical styles. This could involve incorporating traditional Latin American rhythms into other genres or vice versa, fostering a sense of fusion and creative exploration. An important aspect of the clinic will be about developing your own unique voice as a percussionist. This might involve learning how to improvise within the framework of these traditions, exploring personal interpretations of rhythms, and developing narrative skills to build your own percussion solos.

Originally from Bogotá (Colombia), and based in Brooklyn, N.Y., Latin Grammy Award-winning percussionist and composer Samuel Torres thrives at the intersection of Afro-Latin rhythms, Latin jazz, and contemporary classical music. Torres has performed, arranged, produced, and/or recorded with the "who's who" of the jazz, Latin pop, and salsa world, including such luminaries as Tito Puente, Arturo Sandoval, Cecile McLorin Salvant, Wynton Marsalis and the JALC Orchestra, Paquito D'Rivera, Yo-Yo Ma, Chick Corea, Alejandro Sanz, Ricky Martin, Richard Bona, Lila Downs, Angelique Kidjo, Marc Anthony, Rubén Blades, and Shakira. Torres won the Latin Grammy Award for the Best Classical Record in 2019 with his album *Regreso*, a concerto for congas and symphony orchestra. He is a three-time recipient of the New Jazz Works Grant by Chamber Music America. Torres also received 2nd place at the Thelonious Monk Jazz Hand Percussion Competition in 2000.

EXPERIENTIAL WELLNESS

ANDEW VEIT Experiential Wellness (Recreational Drumming and Health) Clinic — Enhancing the Collegiate Percussion Experience by Integrating Music Technology, Electronics, and Amplification Education into the Applied Percussion Curriculum

This session will explore pedagogical techniques of adapting audio technology into collegiate percussion lessons. Recording and amplification knowledge has become a required skillset for the percussion teacher at almost every level of education. This clinic will explore methods on how to instruct students on basic audio techniques while also supporting traditional percussion skills.

Dr. Andrew Veit is a composer, performer, clinician, and adjudicator. He is Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Texas, Permian Basin. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Iowa. He has served as the visiting Principal Percussionist with the West Texas Symphony Orchestra and has performed with the Dubuque Symphony Orchestra, the Fox Valley Orchestra, and the Kaiju Crescendo Symphony. Dr. Veit has also appeared internationally as a soloist and ensemble member of Clocks in Motion and Heartland Marimba Quartet. Presently, he performs and records with his duo, the Veit/Jones Project, which won first prize in the Southern California Marimba International Artist Competition Open Duo division. Previously, Dr. Veit was Adjunct Professor of Percussion at Grayson College in Denison, Texas, and Director of Marching Percussion at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.