

SONA JOBARTEH

Sona Jobarteh is the first female Kora virtuoso to come from a west African Griot family. Breaking away from tradition, she is a pioneer in an ancient male-dominated hereditary tradition that has been exclusively handed down from father to son for the past seven centuries. Reputed for her skill as an instrumentalist, distinctive voice, infectious melodies and her grace onstage, Sona has rapidly risen to international success following the release of her critically acclaimed album “Fasiya” (Heritage) in 2011.

The Kora (a 21-stringed African harp) is one of the most important instruments belonging to the Manding peoples of West Africa (Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau). It belongs exclusively to griot families (hereditary musical families), and only those who are born into one of these families have the right to take up the instrument professionally. Sona, who was born into one of the five principal Griot families, has become the first female to take up this instrument professionally in a male tradition that dates back over seven centuries.

Sona's family carries a heavy reputation for renowned Kora masters, notably her grandfather Amadu Bansang Jobarteh who was an icon in Gambia's cultural and musical history, and her cousin Toumani Diabaté who is renowned for his mastery of the Kora.

In recent years Sona has quickly been rising to international success, headlining major festivals around the world in Brazil, India, South Korea, Ghana, Mexico, Tanzania, Cote D'Ivoire, Lithuania, Poland and Malaysia just to name a few. Sona and her music has the unique ability to touch audiences from all backgrounds and cultures.

EARLY YEARS

Sona began learning the kora at the young age of four from her brother Tunde Jegede. By the age of six, she also started to learn the cello, piano and harp. She gave her first performance on the Kora alongside her brother at London's Jazz Café at the age of five, and her first solo cello recital at the age of eleven at the prestigious South Bank Purcell Room in London. As a young teenager she was admitted into the world renowned institutions of the Royal College of Music and the Purcell School in the UK where she furthered her studies in western classical music. During this time she also excelled in Composition and started to write her first compositions for full orchestra.

By her mid-teens Sona was established as a permanent member of her brother's internationally acclaimed 'ACM Ensemble', with whom she toured the world for many years, having the opportunity to work alongside internationally acclaimed artists such as Oumou Sangaré, Toumani Diabaté and The BBC Symphony Orchestra.

In her late teens Sona continued to pursue her passion for ancient Manding repertoire and began working on the Kora intensively with her father Sanjally Jobarteh, who is steeped in the knowledge of this ancient tradition. She completed a degree in African Culture and Linguistics at SOAS University in London, and it was during this time that she started to develop her identity as a solo artist.

COMPOSITION AND FILM

In 2010 Sona was commissioned to compose her first film score to the multi-award winning documentary film entitled “The Motherland”. This soundtrack saw Sona cultivate a new genre in African cinematic music, bridging the gap between her African and European musical knowledge. For this score, Sona invented a new instrument which she named ‘Nkora’, a cross between an Ngoni and a Kora in order to capture the sonic landscapes she was looking for. Drawing on her skills as a composer, multi-instrumentalist and producer this work was a milestone in Sona’s musical development. Directed by Owen Alik Shahadah, this film went on to collect multiple awards around the world.

Following the release of this debut film score, Sona continued to explore and develop what has now become one of her most captivating qualities – her voice.

The quality of her voice brought her to the attention of the prolific Hollywood film composer Alex Heffes in 2011 who asked her to feature as solo vocalist in the soundtrack to the film “The First Grader”. The piece featuring Sona won the “Discovery of the Year Prize” at the Hollywood World Soundtrack Awards in 2012. Sona performed the piece live in Belgium, backed by a live 80-piece orchestra.

This success led to Sona being asked by director Justin Chadwick to record again as solo vocalist for the soundtrack to his blockbuster Hollywood movie “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom” in 2014. In 2016 Sona featured on the Hollywood series Roots based on the 1976 novel by Alex Haley.

CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED ALBUM: FASIYA

In 2011 Sona released her critically acclaimed first solo album entitled “Fasiya”. This album was a landmark not only in her personal musical journey, but in the evolving tradition that she has been born into. The album features her abilities on numerous instruments such as the bass, ngoni, flute, guitar and percussion, and also showcases her competence as a mature producer. Working in both The Gambia and UK Sona pieced together a body of work that would establish her unique position in this tradition as both a preserver and a pioneering innovator.

UNIVERSITIES AND EDUCATION

Sona’s work is not only limited to the stage but also blossoms in the world of education. She has taught Kora and Manding music history to university students for many years in the UK, as well as being invited to universities in the US to deliver her unique, engaging lectures in music history which are integrated with live demonstrations on her instruments. Earlier this year she delivered a hugely successful lecture at the prestigious Weimar University in Germany attended by both students and music experts alike.

FOUNDING GAMBIA'S FIRST CULTURAL ACADEMY

In 2014 Sona began her ambitious plans to set up The Gambia's first cultural Academy. She started by founding the Junior department which she named after her late grandfather, Amadu Bansang Jobarteh. The Junior Department has been running with great success, with its students gaining both national and

international recognition. They have featured in numerous State events and opening ceremonies, whilst also performing regularly at top hotel resorts in the country. Last year the Sona's pioneering enterprise gained the attention of the German president which led to him personally visiting the school during his state visit. Following the rapid success of her Junior Department, Sona is now pouring all her efforts into the long-awaited expansion to become the Gambia's first Cultural Academy. The project is gaining momentum and Sona is now revolving much of her career around this pioneering venture.