

Guitarist Conjures The Sound Of The Kora From Thousands Of Miles Away

By Tom Cole, September 11, 2016

Derek Gripper was a musician with a problem. He'd been playing classical music since he was 6 years old — violin, then piano and finally guitar. He was poised for an international career as a classical guitarist. But he remembers going to the homeland of one of his favorite composers, Johann Sebastian Bach.

"It felt kind of strange," he says. "It felt strange to be in Germany playing Bach to them."

What could a South African tell Germans about German music? So Gripper decided to write his own music and adapt the music of his birthplace, Capetown.

At some point during his search for a musical identity, a friend gave him a CD by the kora master Toumani Diabaté, from Mali in West Africa.

"I was just blown away," Gripper says. "I didn't know what it was at all. I didn't know what a kora was; I didn't know who he was. I didn't know anything about the music at all. ... It was one of those things that just hit me, you know? *That's* what I wanted to do — I wanted to play music like *that*."

The kora looks like a giant, upside-down Tootsie Pop. A large gourd sits at the bottom of a long neck traversed by the 21 strings. The player sits, resting the gourd in his lap with the neck vertical, and plucks the strings with the thumb and one finger of each hand.

It's a tradition that dates back some 800 years. Gripper tried to learn it on his guitar, listening to records and scribbling the notes he could discern down on paper.

"You become an archaeologist," he says. "You work it out and you read the CD liner notes and you slow the music down. And you just try and work it out."

Gripper recorded two albums of this music without ever visiting Mali.

"He'd done the whole thing entirely from listening with no one to guide him," says Lucy Duran.

Gripper had emailed Duran for advice because she knows a few things about West African music: She has produced six albums by Toumani Diabaté and a bunch of others. She hosted a popular BBC world music program. And she teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

She had heard about Gripper before he reached out to her. But she didn't know quite what to think about the white South African who was transcribing kora music onto the guitar.

"I think I probably groaned," she recalls, "and rolled my eyes and thought: Oh God. Oh, all right. But as soon as I listened, then I realized that he was approaching this from a very different spirit of just imitation."

Duran and Gripper began a lengthy email correspondence, and the guitarist dove into the music, absorbing everything he could.

Lucy Duran thinks he's pulled it off. "With some careful transcribing and with some re-tuning, it was possible to play kora music pretty much as it sounds on the guitar," she says.

But she still had one nagging question for Gripper.

" 'Why should I bother listening to you? Why don't I just listen to the kora?' " she asked him. "And Derek, of course, who's got a wonderful sense of humor, said, 'Well that's a very good question. [I] don't know that you would necessarily listen to me.' But what I've gradually understood through our conversations is that what he's doing is expanding the universe of classical guitar by bringing a whole new repertoire into it."

That excites the classical guitarist John Williams.

"I think getting the feel and the understanding and the cultural understanding of different music is very important for us as classical players," Williams says.

It's something Williams has done himself, performing with musicians from around the world and recording his own album of arrangements of African music. Williams is often praised by critics for his technique, so when he praises Derek Gripper, it carries some weight.

"He's absolutely amazing," Williams enthuses. "I mean, it sounds a bit superficial to say that it sounds often like two guitars — [but] it's so many notes that it sounds like two guitars. And that in itself really doesn't mean much. It's really what the music's like. And he's got that feel which is just fantastic — you know, I mean unbelievable. ... I think he's someone that we all have a lot to learn from."

Derek Gripper finally made it to Mali earlier this year when Toumani Diabaté himself extended an invitation after hearing Gripper's records. Gripper says he learned a lot.

"In Bamako, I saw a 9-year-old have his first three lessons on the kora. And nobody told him the name of anything. And nobody corrected him or told him, 'Don't do this.' Or, 'Do that and go and practice it,' " Gripper says. "And my goodness, by the third day he was playing something that I would not have chosen as my beginner piece."

He says the style of teaching runs in stark contrast to what he describes as the "Calvinist work ethic" of how Western classical music is taught.

"To see that — to see a musical language being taught and spoken and shared as a language, as opposed to some kind of crazy, pedantic rite — was something. It was very inspiring."

The experience led him to ask a question: "What can a griot teach us about how we play Bach?"

Griots are the bearers of tradition in West Africa — they pass on the stories, music and culture they learned from their predecessors to the next generation. Gripper says the way they do that could teach us something.

"I have this idea that someone like Toumani — you know, the griots who live in an oral tradition — are quite a bit closer to their kind of understanding on a general level of their relationship to music and how they play than classical musicians who've come through a written tradition," he says. "So I've been using that as my 'in' to understand — OK, how would I play this music of Bach?"

Now the 38-year-old guitarist is using what he's learned to play Bach, the music of West Africa, and his own compositions. He's sharing his knowledge on [his website](#) and through the [transcriptions he's made available](#) to other guitarists. And he's played his arrangements of kora music to young black audiences in South Africa.

"I mean, they were up on their feet going completely mad for this music that they'd never heard, but having such an affinity and understanding for it," Gripper says. "Which exactly solved this problem of: Why am I playing Bach to Germans?"

Because maybe you don't have to be from a particular place to enjoy — and share — its music.

<https://www.npr.org/2016/09/11/493427879/guitarist-conjures-the-sound-of-the-kora-from-thousands-of-miles-away>