



# Grant Park Music Festival

Seventy-sixth Season

Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus

Carlos Kalmar, *Principal Conductor*

Christopher Bell, *Chorus Director*

**Eighteenth Program:** Toumani Diabaté: Kora Music from West Africa

**Wednesday, August 11, 2010 at 6:30 p.m.**

Jay Pritzker Pavilion

GRANT PARK ORCHESTRA

Carlos Kalmar, *Conductor*

Toumani Diabaté and the Symmetric Orchestra

Toumani Diabaté, *Kora*

Lassana Diabaté, *Balafón*

Fantamady Kouyate, *Guitar*

Mohamed Koita, *Bass*

Ganda Tounkara, *Ngoni*

Fode Kouyate, *Percussion*

TOUMANI DIABATÉ

*The Mandé Variations*

Toumani Diabaté will also perform unaccompanied and with his ensemble the  
Symmetric Orchestra

CARLOS KALMAR'S biography can be found on page 10.



TOUMANI DIABATÉ is one of the most important musicians in Africa. Toumani plays the *kora*, a harp with 21 strings unique to West Africa. More than any other *kora* player, Toumani is responsible for bringing this instrument to audiences around the world. He is a performer of truly exceptional virtuosity and creativity — someone who shows that the *kora* can rival the world's greatest instruments.

Toumani was born in Bamako, the capital of Mali, in 1965 into a family of exceptional *griots* (the hereditary musician/historian caste); his research shows 71 generations of *kora* players from father to son. The most notable was his father, Sidiki Diabaté (c. 1922-1996), a *kora* player of legendary fame in West Africa, dubbed “King of the Kora” at the prestigious international Black Arts Festival Festac in 1977, and a continuing inspiration to all *kora* players. Sidiki was born in Gambia of Malian parents. He settled in Mali after the Second World War, where he became famous for his virtuoso “hot” and idiosyncratic style of playing (echoes of which can be heard in Toumani’s style).

After Mali became independent in 1960, Sidiki was invited to join the Ensemble National Instrumental, a government sponsored group formed to celebrate the richness of Malian culture, along with his first wife, Toumani’s mother, the singer Nene Koita. Sidiki and Nene were much favored by the first president, Modibo Keita, who gave them the land on which the family house now stands, near the presidential palace in Bamako.

This was the musical environment in which Toumani was raised, though he was self-taught, never learning directly from his father except by listening. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Bamako music scene was being influenced by sounds from further afield, especially black American music: soul music was particularly popular, as was Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Smith and British rock acts such as Led Zeppelin. Exposure to these sounds and to Bamako’s modern ensembles were important to Toumani’s musical development.

A child prodigy, Toumani began playing the *kora* at the age of five, a time when the Malian government was actively encouraging regional ensembles to represent local traditions. Toumani was recruited by the ensemble from Koulikoro (forty miles east of Bamako), with whom he made his public debut at the age of thirteen to great local acclaim. In 1984, at nineteen, Toumani joined the group of brilliant young musicians who accompanied the great diva Kandia Kouyate, the best known female *griot* singer in Mali, with whom he toured throughout Africa.

Toumani took from his father the idea of developing the *kora* as a solo instrument, and brought it to another level. Toumani discovered a way to play bass, rhythm and solo all at the same time, a method that would take him to the world stage. Toumani first came to the Europe in 1986 to accompany another Malian singer, Ousmane Sacko, and stayed in London for seven months. During this period, at age 21, he recorded his first solo album, *Kaira*. This was a groundbreaking album, the first ever solo *kora* recording; it remains a best seller and one of the finest albums of *kora* music to date. In 1986 Toumani also made his first appearance at a WOMAD festival. During his time in the UK, Toumani met and worked informally with musicians from many fields of music and encountered traditions that he had not previously known, such as Indian classical music, from which he derived the “*jugalbandi*” idea (musical dialogue between two instruments) that has since become one of his trademarks.

Toumani’s first major recorded collaboration was with the Spanish flamenco group Ketama. When he met them they immediately began doing “*palmas*” (interlocked flamenco clapping) to his music. The resulting album, *Songhai*, was a perfect synthesis of *kora* and flamenco.

For Toumani, experimentation is simply part of the job of a modern *griot*: “The *griot*’s role is making communication between people, but not just historical communication. In Mali I can work in the traditional way, elsewhere I can work in a different way. Why not?” In 1990 Toumani formed the Symmetric Orchestra. For Toumani the name evokes a perfect balance — a symmetry — between tradition and modernity, and between the contributions of musicians from a number of closely related countries. Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Mali itself were all part of the medieval Mandé Empire. Toumani had the idea of recreating the cultural equilibrium

of the Mandé Empire in a modern musical context, offsetting traditional and electric guitars with hard-edged *sabar* drumming, praise-singing and lute-riffing alongside pounding kit drums, with Toumani's own rippling *kora* phrases sounding through it all. The orchestra name first appeared on a CD with the elaborate 1992 project, *Shake The Whole World*, released only in Japan and Mali. Maintaining a weekly residence at the Hogon in Bamako throughout Toumani's career, the group continued to evolve and grow over the years, culminating in the release of the acclaimed album *Boulevard de l'Indépendance* in 2005 and the extensive international touring that followed.

In the early-mid 1990s, in Bamako, Toumani began to gather around him a number of exceptionally talented musicians, such as the brilliant Bassekou Kouyate on *ngoni* and Keletigui Diabaté on *balafon*, cultivating a certain sound and approach to his music with a type of jazz-jugalbandi-griot instrumental ensemble that can be heard on his album *Djelika*, released in 1995. In the same year Toumani travelled to Madrid to record *Songhai 2*.

In 1998 Toumani recorded a *kora* duet album with Ballake Sissoko. Their two fathers had released the 1970s classic *Cordes Anciennes* ("Ancient Strings"), so the new album was called *New Ancient Strings*, a tribute to the original record as well as an attempt to bring such material to a modern audience.

The connections between the blues and West African music are well known. Taj Mahal had listened to, and played with, many great *kora* players, and what most struck him as bearing an uncanny resemblance with the blues was the plucking techniques of the *kora* and other Malian string instruments. "They say that blues and jazz came from Africa," says Toumani. "The *kora* and *ngoni*, they're very old, many centuries old. So maybe the blues were once being played on these instruments. Making the album with Taj is like bringing the old and new together." The album, *Kulanjan*, was released in 1999.

Toumani has participated in many other recording projects both at home and abroad: he appears on Ali Farka Touré's eponymous debut album for World Circuit; he toured with Salif Keita and appears on both his acclaimed album *Papa* and his latest release, *Mbemba*; he was part of Damon Albarn's "Mali Music" project; he is featured on Kasse Mady Diabaté's 2004 Grammy nominated album *Kassi Kasse*; and in 2007 he was featured on the track *Hope* on Björk's album *Volta*, leading to an inspired guest appearance on her set at the Glastonbury Festival.

In recent years Toumani has been enjoying recognition for his contribution to the development of the *kora*, and as a key figure in African music. In 2004 he received the Zyriab des Virtuoses, a UNESCO prize awarded at the Mawazine Festival organized by King Mohammed 6th of Morocco. He is the first black African ever to be given the prize. Toumani is an active and dynamic member of the Malian musical community, and influential on the new generation. He has been taking steps to help preserve the legacy of traditional *kora* music in Mali and to educate future generations about their rich musical heritage, while also encouraging them to explore the creative possibilities within music. He is President/Director of Mandinka Kora Productions, which actively promotes the *kora* through workshops, festivals, and various cultural events. Toumani is also a teacher of the *kora* and of modern and traditional music at the Balla Fasseke Conservatoire of Arts, Culture and Multimedia, which opened in Bamako at the end of 2004.

The year 2004 also saw Toumani begin working with World Circuit for a trilogy of albums recorded at sessions in the Mandé Hotel in Bamako. The first release from those sessions was the duets album *In the Heart of the Moon*, recorded with the great Ali Farka Touré, which won the Best Traditional World Music Album Grammy Award. Second in the trilogy was *Boulevard de l'Indépendance* by Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, packing the fruit of ten years of experimentation into some of the densest, punchiest, most richly textured music to have come out Africa (the third part is Ali's final solo album, *Savane*). Toumani accompanied Ali on his last concert tour in the summer of 2005, during which they spent three days in a London studio recording the follow up to *In the Heart of the Moon*. Featuring contributions from Orlando "Cachaíto" López on bass, *Ali and Toumani* further demonstrates the magic bond between the two masters; the album received its long-awaited release in February 2010.

Throughout Toumani's career, each of the albums he has released is distinct and highlights his diversity as a musician. This is where Toumani excels — bringing together the old and new in timeless beautiful music, the very best that Africa has.