

# West Africa: further resources

## Activity: introduction to polyrhythm, interlocking and rhythmic harmony

Count:	1	&	2	&	3	&	1	&	2	&	3	&
A	X		(X)		X		(X)		X		(X)	
B	(X)			X			(X)			X		

This is a basic, skeletal, 'two against three' pattern, found throughout Africa. Although at first sight relatively simple, this pattern can be made extraordinarily complex to perform by varying how the notes are grouped, omitting some, splitting parts up between groups and so on. African musicians exploit this to create dense textures and unexpected rhythmic breaks. These ideas have been incorporated into Cuban music and are the foundations of Cuban rhythm. There are several ways to use this as an exercise, going as deep as your class can comfortably manage. Here are two possible ways of going about it (Understanding this approach to rhythm is key to understanding not only Cuban but all Afro-Atlantic polyrhythm.):

1. Stand the class in a circle. Have them beat out the above pattern on their legs (right hand plays A, left hand plays B). You lead them by calling time. Explain that the hands 'dance' as follows: together-right-left-right, together-right-left-right, and so on. Experiment at different tempos.
2. Divide the class into groups A and B. Each group claps as indicated; so, A claps on beats 1, 2 and 3, while B claps on beat 1 and on the 'and' of beat 2.

Once the class can play the two parts comfortably in two groups, you can play around in the following ways:

- ▷ Use two different sound sources for the two patterns, e.g. drums and bells, or wood and metal
- ▷ Either group A or B, or both, omits the bracketed notes
- ▷ Both groups play *only* the bracketed notes.

You may discover that some of these variations are not that easy to perform: explain to your students that each time they try a new idea, they will experience a totally different feel. At all times, both you and they should know where beat 1 is. Counting along out loud is a good way to ensure this.

## Jeliya listening

*Kassi Kasse* – Kasse Mady Diabaté (Hemisphere 2003) – superb vocal jeliya recorded in Kasse Mady's home village

*Kita Kan* – Kandia Kouyaté (Stern's Africa 1999) – fantastic modern vocal jeliya from the diva whose voice causes people to faint in live concerts!

*Mandekalou* – various artists (Syllart 2004) – amazing jeli supergroup featuring Kasse Mady Diabaté, Djelimady Tounkara, Kandia Kouyaté and others

*Sandiya* – Keletigui Diabaté (Contre Jour France 2004) – an amazing, beautiful record, including some traditional bala duets and other, more modern, large-group pieces: essential listening

*Sidi Baba: Guinée: anthologie du balafon Mandingue Vols 1–3* – El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté (Buda 1991–2000) – master of traditional bala music from Guinea

*Mali: cordes anciennes* – Sidiki Diabaté and others (Buda 2000) – seminal album of instrumental kora music from 1970 by legendary masters of the harp

*New Ancient Strings* – Toumani Diabaté/Ballake Sissoko (Hannibal 1999) – stunning album of modern kora duets from the sons of the makers of the original *Ancient Strings* record

*The Mande Variations* – Toumani Diabaté (World Circuit 2008) – his most recent solo outing

*In the Heart of the Moon* – Toumani Diabaté and Ali Farka Touré (World Circuit 2005) – gorgeous, improvised guitar/kora duets mixing jeliya and northern-savannah desert blues styles

*Boulevard de l'indépendance* – Symmetric Orchestra (Nonesuch 2006) – current darlings of the world-music scene, this virtuosic ensemble of Malian musicians weaves modern masterpieces from traditional jeliya roots

*Segu Blue* – Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni Ba (Outhere Records 2007) – wonderful modern ngoni music

*Belle Epoque Vol. 1: Soundiata* – Rail Band (Stern's Africa 2007) – great compilation of early Rail Band classics

*The Syliphone Years* – Bembeya Jazz National (Stern's Africa 2004) – gorgeous compilation of the brilliant Bembeya Jazz: essential listening

*Bajourou* – Big String Theory (Ace Records 2002) – astonishing guitar duets from Djelimady Tounkara and Bouba Sacko, with soaring vocals from Lafia Diabaté

## **Further resources**

### **Books**

*Mande Music* by Eric Charry (Chicago University Press 2000) – indispensable guide to the music of the Mande world

*The Rough Guide to World Music: vol. 1 – Africa and the Middle East* by Simon Broughton and Mark Ellingham (Rough Guides 2000) – exhaustive catalogue of sounds and styles from the region

*African Rhythm and African Sensibility* by John Miller Chernoff (Chicago University Press 1979) – still-relevant and readable academic book about Ghanaian drumming and approaches to music

## Magazines

*Songlines*

*FRoots*

## Radio

*World Routes* on BBC Radio 3 – flagship world-music show presented by a Mande specialist

DJ Edu on BBC 1xtra – modern African hip hop, ragga and urban sounds

Rita Ray presenting *Africa on your Street*– go to [www.bbc.co.uk/africabeyond/africaonyourstreet](http://www.bbc.co.uk/africabeyond/africaonyourstreet)

*Afropop Worldwide* – internet radio station and resource for all things African – go to [www.afropop.org](http://www.afropop.org)

## Further exploration

There are so many wonderful west-African artists and music styles we haven't been able to cover, especially the great music of Senegambia. There you find brilliant, international stars such as **Baaba Maal** and **Yousou N'Dour**, both from Senegal, the marvellous **Manecas Costa** from Guinea Bissau and **Cesaria Evora** from Cape Verde.

Nowadays, of course, the whole world has been influenced by US hip hop and R&B. Many young west-African groups are turning this sound into their own, fusing African traditional themes and sounds with the familiar urban sound of breakbeats and computer-driven synthesised grooves. Senegalese hip-hoppers Daara J, Nigerian rapper 2Face Idibia and Ghanaian hiplife star Reggie Rockstone all blend US and local styles in differing ways. Reggae, too, has a large following and several local artists such as Alpha Blondy and Tiken Jah Fakoly, both from Côte d'Ivoire.

In short, just as Europe's musical inheritance includes everything from classical 18th-century art music, rowdy Balkan folk, gentle Scottish balladeering and every conceivable variant of pop since the Beatles, west-African music is also incredible for its richness, diversity, depth and long history. It certainly deserves further study – any one of the traditions noted above could become the centrepiece of a term-length project involving music performance, dance, history, religion, discussions around tradition and modernity, and the spread of cultures and its reflection in music.