



Seckou Keita is a griot from Senegal. He learnt to play the kora by ear. He started at a very young age and was taught by his grandfather. In this session, the group will learn about a project, 'African Rhapsodies', that Seckou developed, to be able to perform with orchestras. There will be time to reflect on the following questions:

What is classical music and where does it come from?

What role does a griot play in contemporary times?

Does tradition matter?

Background information

- 'African Rhapsodies' is an album released in 2023. It was recorded with the BBC Concert Orchestra.
- The music was arranged by Italian double bassist, composer and arranger, Davide Mantovani.
- The music allows for improvisation. Every time it is performed, Seckou invites guest musicians to perform with him. So far this has included Abel Selaocoe (cellist), Ayanna Witter-Johnson (cellist), Isata Kanneh-Mason (pianist).
- Griot is pronounced 'Gree-oh'.
- This session includes research and extension activities so may need two sessions to complete in full.

Resources

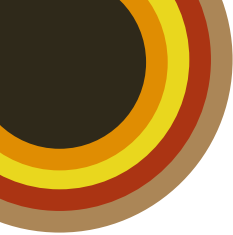
1. The making of African Rhapsodies video (Slide 17 on ppt).
2. Powerpoint
3. Handout – What is a griot?
4. Worksheet – African Rhapsodies
5. You will also need to access the songs:
 - *Miro* from the album *Miro* by Seckou Keita
 - *Simply Beautiful Miro* from the album *African Rhapsodies* by Seckou Keita

The Session

1. What is a griot?

- i. Use [slides 2-8](#) to explain the griot tradition. The slides can be edited. The content of these slides is also available as a download, if you prefer to use it as a handout. You could extend the activity by asking learners to illustrate the handout with images and prepare their own powerpoint.
- ii. On [slide 9](#) there are three questions. You could use the 1-2-4-All model:

Give learners a minute to think about one of the questions, then ask them to pair up and discuss their thoughts for 2 minutes. Pairs then become fours and the group continues the discussion for 4 minutes. Each group then shares back a key idea to the whole group. You might repeat this for all three questions, encouraging groups to mix as you go.



2. Classical music and oral tradition

- i. Gather ideas from the group about what comes to mind when they think of ‘classical music’ and what comes to mind when they think of ‘African music’.

[Note: Before starting the activity, set some ground rules if need be. Explain that we are going to be talking in generic terms about music from different cultures and the need to do this with respect]

- ii. Create two lists on two pieces of flipchart paper. Responses might be:

‘Classical’ Music	‘African’ music
<p style="text-align: center;">Orchestra Western Sheet music Conductor Proms</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Drums Music to dance to Rap Traditional Not written</p>

- iii. Terminology matters and becomes part of the way we think about, visualise and conceptualise what we see and hear. It is therefore important to add some critical thinking to this activity and move away from any stereotypes that might emerge. Pose some questions and encourage the group to research the answers:

- *Where does the term ‘classical’ come from? What does it mean?*
- *Where does the term ‘Western’ come from?*
- *When we think of traditional Indian, African or Cuban music for example, is that classical?*
- *Africa is a huge continent with 54 countries and over 3,000 ethnic groups of people. Is ‘African’ music too generic?*
- *What problems might a generic term like this create?*
- *What comes to mind when we think of ‘African Drumming?’. What do you think of this phrase?*
- *Do we talk about ‘European’ music or ‘South American’ music in the same way?*



- iv. Come back to your original lists. Ask learners:
 - *Is this over-simplified?*
 - *Does thinking about music in this way reinforce stereotypes?*
 - *Do terms like 'old' or 'traditional' straddle both columns?*
- v. Show **slides 10-14** which feature other major successful artists from Africa. This is just a small selection. Ask learners:
 - *What other artists are you aware of?*
 - *What thoughts or questions come to mind when we see this range of musicians?*
- vi. **Slide 15** includes an extension activity:

Extension Activity

There are a wide range of well-known kora players like Toumani Diabate and Ballake Sissoko. Sona Jobarteh and Wassa Kouyaté are female kora players from the griot tradition.

Choose one kora player to research and prepare a short presentation of the impact of their music on audiences in their homelands and beyond.

3. Putting the kora at the heart of an orchestra

- i. Explain that Seckou put together a significant project to have his music scored for orchestra. The resulting album is called 'African Rhapsodies' and was recorded with the BBC Concert Orchestra and guest musicians. The video you are about to watch formed part of the EPK for the project. An EPK is an Electronic Press Kit. It is circulated to venues and collaborators when pitching for a show and is used by marketing teams and press to sell the show.
- ii. After watching the video, ask learners to work in small groups and use the following activity to discuss the challenges there may have been for Seckou, Davide and for the orchestra in bringing this project to fruition.
- iii. In small groups, ask learners to draw three shapes on flipchart as shown on **slide 16**. On the outside of the shapes, learners write down the skills each of them may have needed to bring this project to fruition. On the inside they write down the feelings they may have felt.
- iv. Use the following questions to have a whole group discussion, or learners could work through them in small groups, or they can be given as a written activity. The questions are included as a handout.



- *Who are the key people involved in this project?*

Seckou – his music is entirely memorised and he does not read music.

Davide – he is a musician (double bass) and an arranger. It is his job to take Seckou's music and write a score for the orchestra.

The orchestra – it is their job to play the music professionally so it can be recorded for an album. The rehearsals and recording took place over 2 consecutive days.

- *What made Davide the perfect person to work with Seckou on this project?*
- *Seckou says that “sometimes Italian music is dramatic, intense and full of turns”. Have you listened to the work of Italian composers? Would you agree with this description of their music?*
- *Seckou says, “there I am, performing with musicians who have never heard my music before. Some musicians have never heard the kora before, but they have this piece of paper and suddenly we talk, we share, we express something. That I find so beautiful”. What is the significance of this statement?*
- *There are significant differences between Abel Selaoe (guest cellist) and Seckou Keita in terms of their homelands (South Africa and Senegal), their languages and their musical upbringing. Abel describes them having to connect, search and take risks to make their music work together – almost like a dance that has to take place between them.*

Have you ever collaborated with someone from a different background, or who has different skills to you?

What was the experience like?

What made it successful or challenging?

If you haven't yet had that opportunity, how could you make it happen?

Why does Seckou say that every time he performs African Rhapsodies with a different orchestra, they will tell a different story?

- v. *On the last slide of the powerpoint there are links to music videos of the same song. Miro recorded with kora and vocals, and the orchestral version *Simply Beautiful Miro*. Learners could listen to both versions of the song and see how Davide Mantovani has used instruments in place of Seckou's voice in places. The orchestral version features Abel Selaoe on cello and vocals.*