

Press release

May 2020

SECKOU KEITA'S MUSIC BOOK NOW ON SALE

CENTURIES OF UNWRITTEN TRADITION CAPTURED IN NEW SECKOU KEITA COMMISSION

Seckou Keita's Music Book, a collection of eight books of sheet music adapted for piano, flute, clarinet violin and cello, have gone on sale today via his website www.seckoukeita.com. The books form a collection of 7 original pieces of music composed by Seckou, including *Future Strings in E*, *Bamba*, and *Missing You*.

The books are the fruit of a special project which has taken place over the last year, which saw the accumulation of a centuries-old oral tradition, the music of Senegalese virtuoso kora player **Seckou Keita**, being transcribed for western instruments for the first time in a groundbreaking new project from Opera North in partnership with **Theatr Mwldan** and **Sinfonia Cymru**, supported by the **PRS Foundation's Talent Development Partner Network** and **Arts Council England**. The resulting transcriptions were performed by Sinfonia Cymru musicians **Abel Selaocoe** (cello) and **Helen Wilson** (flute), award-winning jazz pianist **Zoe Rahman**, and **Paul Moylan** (double bass), in a twilight concert at the **Howard Assembly Room** at Opera North, Leeds, back in January 2019.

A descendant of the Malian royal family on his father's side, and griots (hereditary musicians) on his mother's, Seckou mastered the harp-like kora – as well as other griot disciplines including poetry, storytelling, theology, history and diplomacy – over years spent with his grandfather Jali Kemo Cissokho. Having relocated to the UK he now combines a busy touring schedule with education work and his many collaborations including his duo with Welsh harpist Catrin Finch. Their two albums together have each won the *fRoots* Critics' Poll Album of The Year, and the latest, 2018's *SOAR*, made end of year top tens in *Mojo* and *Songlines* magazines, among others.

As he began to raise a family far from his ancestral home, Seckou saw how precarious the survival of his tradition was in the contemporary world, and began to think about ways to leave a physical record of it for future generations to pick up and perform.

He says: "When I moved to the UK in 1998, and my first child Bintou was born here, I asked myself whether she would have the opportunity I had, in a griot family, with the kora, the

music and everything around me. Maybe not. But I have a duty to train her, to give her that knowledge, as part of her heritage. If it's memorised, there's no way I can pass it on."

"I thought that the way I could get kids to learn would be to make a book they can grab and use to play the kora player's music. I've been dreaming of doing this for a long time, of allowing them to get their hands on my music, without needing a kora, or being in a griot family or whatever. Just open the book, read it, play it. I realised that if I did that with my music, it would travel more. It would live longer than I will live."

Seckou approached a previous collaborator, the English jazz pianist, composer and producer **Alex Wilson**, with his idea, and work began with two five-day residencies at Opera North in Leeds. Breaking down, analysing and notating the nuances of this complex, shimmering, highly ornamented music without losing any of its essential character was a huge task for Alex, who used software to slow down recordings of Seckou's performances, before prising apart the three 'voices' of the kora - bass, accompaniment and melody - and scoring them for piano, cello, violin, flute and clarinet.

When drafts of the scores were made, Alex and Seckou invited musicians to test them. Luke Newby, a South African clarinettist who had never heard Seckou's music before, played the melody for *Missing You*, a piece dedicated to a close friend of Seckou's who had passed away. "I was supposed to be concentrating", says Seckou, "but I was almost in tears with the emotion of listening, of sitting and hearing my music being played by a stranger for the first time on classical instruments. This was it: this was the music I'd dreamt of."

Seckou feels the weight of his responsibility for the tradition that he is perpetuating, and the pressure to "get it right". But, he says, "my grandfather's time was different to mine. And my kids' will be different again. It can't go backwards. My prayers, and meditations and hope will be inside this book. It's like watching my music taking off."

Seckou Keita's *Music Book* are available to purchase from his website at £25 per pair, or £65 for a full set.

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Notes to editors:

Howard Assembly Room

The Howard Assembly Room is a captivating, inspiring performance venue loved equally by performers and guests for its blend of Victorian and contemporary styling. The venue plays an important role in fuelling the Yorkshire cultural scene with a varied programme of events, gigs, films, talks and family workshops. The 300-capacity central Leeds venue is a fitting host to receive Opera North's rich and varied performance programming.

Under proposed redevelopment plans, in March 2019, following the tenth anniversary of its opening, the Howard Assembly Room will close as part of Opera North's ambitious renovation programme. Improvements will include its own dedicated entrance and box office, with a new restaurant and bar replacing a row of vacant shop units beneath the venue. A new atrium space will link the restaurant and bar space with stairs and lift access directly to the Howard Assembly Room, as well as improved front of house facilities for audiences at the venue. On re-opening, an extended artistic programme will increase the number of performances, gigs and events.

Opera North and Opera North Projects

Opera North is a national opera company based in Leeds, and is a leading UK arts organisation.

Rooted in the North of England, international in outlook, we create extraordinary experiences, every day. Our award-winning work tours to theatre stages and concert halls throughout the North and beyond, including to London and major international festivals

Opera North Projects takes apart the elements of opera: words, music, visual arts and performance, and puts them back together in new ways. Opera North Projects produces small-scale touring shows and site-specific installations, together with a programme of artist residencies called Resonance, supported by the PRS Foundation.

Home is the beautifully restored Howard Assembly Room in Leeds, a flexible performance space whose public programme is curated by the Projects Department.

The work of Opera North Projects brings artforms, technology and artists together in unexpected ways, collaborating with partners including the Royal Opera House, Hull 2017 UK City of Culture, Latitude Festival, Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the Barbican.

Theatr Mwldan

Theatr Mwldan is a vibrant arts and cinema complex and a major producing venue situated in the centre of Cardigan, on the coast of west Wales. Mwldan originates and creates a number of professional productions and touring projects every year, specialising primarily in world music and traditional music. These projects tour to venues and festivals within the UK and internationally. In 2017 Mwldan launched the record label bendigedig in partnership with ARC Music Productions Ltd to complete the 360-degree model of production, touring and releasing worldwide. At Mwldan's heart is the belief that the arts can deliver life-changing and life-enhancing experiences that have the power to change perceptions and increase tolerance, breaking down cultural divides and allowing greater understanding – as relevant for the community we live in as it is for the planet we live on. This vision is at the core of Mwldan and all its activities. Mwldan is a not-for-profit social enterprise and a registered charity.

Sinfonia Cymru

Sinfonia Cymru is a mould-breaking chamber orchestra from Wales, which supports professional musicians in the early stages of their careers. Its players are some of the best and most talented young professionals from across the UK, passionate about performing and programming music for audiences throughout Wales and beyond. The orchestra regularly presents orchestral tours, chamber concerts and concerts in unusual places and spaces, creative learning projects, and cross-genre collaborations with musicians and composers across the wider musical spectrum. Sinfonia Cymru had its first BBC Radio 3 broadcast in 2018, with another to follow in spring 2019. This year's projects include a Wales tour with cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason and conductor Jonathan Bloxham, a performance of Tosca with Bryn Terfel at the Abu Dhabi Festival, and a tour with world- music group Kabantu across Wales plus Manchester and London.

PRS Foundation

Opera North is one of PRS Foundation's 40 Talent Development Partners for 2018-19. These organisations are working at the frontline of talent development in the UK, supporting a broad range of individual music creators across different music genres and UK regions. PRS Foundation's Talent Development partners have been selected for the quality and range of opportunities they are offering in their region/music specialism and the year-round impact their work is having on the music creators

they support. Each Talent Development Partner receive a grant from the Foundation for their year-round activity. Partners will also act as PRS Foundation Ambassadors, signposting music creators not currently aware of our support to our funds for individual music creators (e.g. our Open Fund, our Composers Fund, Women Make Music and Momentum).

[Alex Wilson](#)

Winner of European Jazz LUKAS Award 2018, with nine albums to his name and performances in over 60 countries, Alex Wilson is a pianist, arranger and composer with considerable experience in the field of world music and jazz. He has delivered six projects in Havana, latterly composing and producing an album of traditional Cuban music for EMI Production Music. Creator of the London Latin Jazz Festival, the Erlbacher Music Festival, former musical director/arranger to Mexican guitar duo Rodrigo y Gabriela, pianist for salsa luminaries Cheo Feliciano, Adalberto Santiago, Tito Allen, Tito Gomez and world/jazz stars Courtney Pine, Hugh Masakela and Ernest Ranglin, Alex has appeared twice with Wynton Marsalis's Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra as special guest.



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