

Musicians' portrait: Kouame Sereba

The Polifonia profession working group has taken a variety of paths to obtain a nuanced picture of contexts, situations and settings in which professional musicians work and function in today's society. One such path is to profile successful musicians, also such musicians who have not followed the "normal" pattern regarding education and professional career.

Our studies show on the one hand that as society changes, its expectations with regard to professionalism for musicians change. On the other hand we also find that among professional musicians' new – or perhaps rather unfamiliar - approaches to being creative and performing artists develop.

I have chosen to profile a highly successful musician who has lived and worked in Norway for two decades. Today, Kouame Sereba is indeed an important player in our musical life. However, his cultural background is different from that of most of his colleagues, and his career as well. But most important in this context is, in my opinion, the fact that he has a concept of being a creative, performing musical artist which differs from that of most of those musicians he is surrounded by. Kouame's views on the audience as the owner of the music, his relationship to the audience, and his obligation to the music are quite remarkable and indeed unfamiliar in our part of the world.

Kouame leaves me with some important questions: are his West-African rooted views on musical performance relevant to the western culture? Has the western conservatory tradition forgotten to take the audience into account when training its students to become interesting and challenging performing artists? What would the western classical music concert tradition be able to gain from moving a bit closer to the community-based concept of music making?

Kouame Sereba has an international career as a performing musician. He performs alone and with other artist - musicians, storytellers and dancers – for a variety of audiences. All the time he comes back to his favourite audience; young children, preferably those in pre-school age, those who sit close to him in small groups.

Kouame was born in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. While still very young – around 10 years of age - he moved from the city to live with his uncle in the countryside. He went to school as most kids do, and he performed. He loved to be on stage, and he loved to direct small stage shows with and for his school mates.

Was he specially trained for that?

No. But he had been surrounded by music since he was a baby; his mother always singing and humming while doing her chores around the house, and in the small community of his uncle's, he would sit in the shade in the late evenings listening to the old men playing their mouth harps, singing their songs and telling their stories. He had been drawn into the spell of the sounds and the atmospheres created by those expressing themselves as their forefathers and foremothers did. He wanted to be part of this, and he wanted to share it with his friends.

Why did you become a musician? I asked him. He looked at me for a long time with a distant smile on his face. I could see he was scanning his memory.

It just happened! I just had to!

My father was a storyteller in the community, but I didn't know till I was an adult. He never told us that he would go out and tell stories in public places. But, of course, he told me and my brothers and sisters stories too. He was dad for us, dad involving us in his imaginative world. And mom always sang. Not directly to us or for us. She just sang: songs without words, and songs with words. I remember well her performance of stories with animal characters who always would express themselves through songs.

So you were surrounded by griots?

No, my parents were not griots. A griot is a person who has inherited the duty of transmitting the culture of his tribe to the next generation. The griot needs to be faithful to his tradition. My folks were rooted in the tradition but were not obliged to give it away without adding their own contributions to it. For me, this has become very important. I have my cultural roots, and I have a strong love for my tradition, I know and work with griots, but I could not have existed as an artist without the freedom to create my own things.

So, early in your life you decided to become an artist – and as soon as you were old enough, I suppose you found a school that would give you the right training!

No, no. In the local context I was already a performer. Since I was in elementary school I was called upon from various communities to come and play and dance. When I was 15, I started a small music and dance group. We made stage productions and performed around in the area. It was my special job to teach new members of the group our repertoire, and to help them become part of the team, as it were. I didn't have any theoretical background and when I see it in retrospect, I realise that my aim was to involve them in the special atmosphere the group was able to create on stage, more than trying to teach them specifics in music. Our music making was based on creating an atmosphere, a kind of magic mood which would catch the audience. But no, I didn't go to a music school.

But what were your aims? You were intelligent; you were successful as a performer. What did you want to do with it?

When I see myself in the rear mirror, I think I was a kind of dreaming child. I was caught by the magic of the music and the dance, it was very important to me. At the same time, I felt I needed challenges. Not necessarily in music, just in my life. So when I was around 20, I left the country. In the course of the next 4-5 years I lived and worked – not necessarily with music, but with whatever was available – in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Sudan, Egypt and Israel. In 1983 - I was 24 years old at that time – I decided to go to Norway. I had heard about the clean air and the dark winters and the open society, and I wanted to see what that was like.

And you are still in Norway! In spite of its long and indeed dark winters!

When I arrived, I managed to be accepted at a junior college where I studied Norwegian language and history, and made music. A junior college is a type of school where kids go after they have finished 12 or 13 years of compulsory school and before they enter universities. Junior colleges are not governed by strict regulations and tough exams. They create a framework for their students to develop their personalities and cultivate their special interests, very often in the artistic field.

So you finally decided you would become a musician?

No, on the contrary. I didn't want to disappoint my parents, so I applied to and was accepted by the Oslo School of Engineering. I wanted to become something 'real'! You see, in my tradition, music is something most people do, but not as a profession. I remember at one stage in my childhood, after I had been playing and dancing for years, and my folks had been proud of me, they came to me one day and said: Now, Kouame, now you'll soon be an adult, therefore you should stop acting as a child, making music, dancing and performing all the time! You should put all your energy into school work. For several years after that I lived a kind of double life. I went to school and took part in the traditional cultural things in my family. In the city, I was part of modern urban life, which, for me, included performance, not within my tradition but as in any other major city in the world. However, to come back to your question, to become a musician was not an option for me.

How did it go then, at the school of engineering?

I lost. Or rather, I won! The musician won. Over the engineer! It was hard on my parents for a while, but eventually, as I did well with performances in prestigious places and with CDs with my name on, they appreciated it and supported me. So, no hard feelings any more! On the contrary!

So, at last, you had made your decision, a decision it seems to me you had made within yourself many, many years ago without in fact admitting it. I imagine you applied to become a student at one of the conservatoires in Norway then!

Kouame smiles, with a clear presence this time.

I was a fairly good musician already in my own right. I wanted to develop the skills which are important to me to become an even better performer. I didn't even consider applying to a conservatoire. I wouldn't be able to get in anyhow. You know, I can't even read staff notation!

You said "the skills which are important to me". What do you mean by that?

Obviously it is to be able to play better all the time on the various instruments I play: drums, do-do, finger piano and others. But that is neither the most interesting nor the most challenging part. I'll try to explain, but I don't know if I'll be able to make you understand. It's like this:

To me, music is not something I own because I'm a so-called artist or musician. Music is something that is owned by people, by any audience. What I do, is to borrow music from my audience, or perhaps rather their musical experience, and use it, play with it, juggle with it, and make an artistic expression carrying my signature out of the material I borrow. Then I give this artistic expression back to those who own the music. If I do a good job, the audience and I will be able to establish a musical communication based on something we have in common. If I do a good job, I will be able to give them back surprises, magic experiences, keys to rooms in their own traditions that they hardly knew existed. But as long as I actively relate to their musical experience, they don't get lost. If I do a good job, the musical property of the audience will be a little bit different after the performance than it was before. This is what is important to me. In a way, I need to be more concerned with those who have come to listen to me, than to the music I'm playing. Not that it doesn't matter whether I play well. I need to be very good; I need to be able to demonstrate that when I offer to play with their music, I treat it well. Artistically, I mean, and that includes the technical aspect as well. And I need to have something to add to it, something which makes my performance a piece of art; something which makes a difference and adds to what was there in the first place.

How do you know if you succeed in your artistic endeavours?

You know, I love to perform for little children. One of the reasons for that is that they always let me know when I succeed. It's impossible to fool them, and they will never be polite and pretend what I do on stage is good if it isn't. Rikskonsertene in Norway has given me fabulous opportunities to produce programmes and perform for children in schools and kindergartens. This has been the best university I could ever attend. I attend it all the time, and those little 'teachers' give me more honest feedback than any conservatoire professor. You see, there is a piece of gold that you need to try and find in every performance. If you go on stage without doing your very utmost to find that piece of gold every time, you deceive your audience. Children, more than adults, let you know when you succeeded in finding the gold. Adults may be polite and not let you know that in fact you let them down. That is dangerous, first of all for me as an artist. That is why I go back to playing for children all the time. They remind me of my obligations to audiences in general.

But aren't children often a difficult audience? They are not used to sitting down, listening to a performer who sings or plays or dances!

If I consider what I'm presenting to them as *my* art, and they should not disturb me because I have something important to share with them, something which is more important to me than they are, then I have a problem. As I said before, the music belongs to them. I borrow it to create something which may be unique – call it art if you wish – something I want to give back to them. Although I'm on stage, I'm not in a monopoly situation. I've invited my audience to a communicative experience, and it is my duty to make that happen.

What do you mean by communicative experience?

Oh, that is difficult to explain! If I'm able to establish a situation where the audience feel that I'm on their side; I'm taking their cultural experience – in a wide sense, that is – as my point of departure so they in a way accept me and include me, then I can take them on journeys which will – or might - open doors in them, doors that were not opened before. They get new experiences but in an atmosphere which is inclusive.

But how can you create an inclusive atmosphere with African music which is unfamiliar to most people in Norway? I would think that would be much easier for someone playing traditional Norwegian folk music, or Grieg, or maybe even Beethoven!

It is not the music itself which makes the situation inclusive or exclusive. A good performing artist can establish an inclusive setting for communication in music independent of which music he or she is playing. I imagine it may be somewhat more difficult – or I should rather say different – for musicians who are dependent on written scores for their music making, but I am convinced that for any musician whose main interest is not himself or herself, not the instrument, not the technical problems any musician will be facing in performance, but the *audience*, an inclusive atmosphere – an atmosphere which acknowledges the cultural and indeed musical goods the audience bring to the performance – can be established. As I've said several times; for me that is the most important aspect of any performance! Let me add that this is easier to conceive if you think that music is not only music. Music is a vehicle which carries a whole lot of human experience. And those human experiences are basically the same all over the world.

Kouame, you've been living and working in Norway for more than 20 years now. You do your own things; you work with other artists in Norway as well as internationally. You have released a number of recordings. You speak Norwegian fluently. But the instruments you play and the music you perform are different from what most musicians in this part of the world are familiar with. Do you see yourself as an exotic minority among artists in Norway?

I know, of course, that in the West I am a minority, ethnically speaking as well as culturally and musically. However, an artist is never a minority or a majority. An artist is a person who is able to create something which, as I've already told you, communicates to other people. I don't think a white, Norwegian pianist, born in Bergen and with a diploma from the Norwegian Academy of Music, thinks of herself as a Norwegian when she enters the stage to perform. I am African, and my musical roots – at least some of them - go back to the music of my community in West Africa. But I am a musical artist who, I believe, is able to communicate with audiences in most parts of the world. Not because I'm an African, but because I'm a musician.

But you still relate to your people and your culture in Africa, don't you?

Of course, I do. You know, many things have changed in the musical culture in the Ivory Coast. Traditions are still strong, but even over the last 20 years they have changed, influenced as they are by musics from all over the world. When I come back and share with my people the music I 'took with me' when I left, it is new to them. I experienced that a CD I made with traditional music from West Africa was not very well received in Abidjan. However, a recording I made where I used traditional material and gave that a modern, ambient musical rapping became a best seller. There are lots of reflections you may make over such experiences. One I've made is that traditional music – or folk music if you wish – is a living organism. It changes all the time even if some people like to think it doesn't. Let me take that thought a step further. A performer of folk music builds on traditions; musical traditions obviously, but even more so traditions with regard to atmospheres and moods. When I transmit the musical tradition in which I grew up, I don't necessarily play as my forefathers did, but I create – in my own way, as an artist – the same type of atmosphere or mood as they created.

Again I need to come back to children. Children will always try to imitate adults. In music they cannot do what a professional performer does, they don't have the skills, but they imitate, or at least try to imitate the mood you've created with the help of your music. There is a kind of honesty in this. Non-speculative, artistic honesty. This type of artistic honesty is the basis for musical co-operation. As you said, I've been in Norway for more than 20 years, and I've been working together with a great number of artists hardly any of whom have knowledge of West African music. I find it is possible to create music together across purely musical boundaries as long as there is artistic honesty, human respect, and a common search for something genuine in the musical material and the atmosphere that may grow out of that material. This may sound obvious and even naïve. I can tell you, it is difficult. It is tempting to live up to certain images. Look at Idol or the European Song Contest. All these youngsters who try to live up to an image. There is no such thing as artistic honesty in that.

You are a searching artist, Kouame. However, when I see you on stage in various settings, you always seem to have full control. You may have brought with you a group of youngsters whom you include in your performance, but you still look as if you know exactly how things will proceed. I'm sure you don't always!

As I said, to go on stage with honesty, wanting to communicate with the audience, not impress them, is very difficult. Scary in a way. Every time! But I think all artists need to think when they enter stage that this is going to work well. You have to trust yourself. You have to be one hundred percent present in what you do. You have to forget all the possible problems involved in the performance, and you have to see all the things that happen – even those unexpected things – as an artistic and communicative opportunity. You have to like it, to be convinced that it is important for yourself and for those you perform with and for.

You didn't tell me how it is to work with musicians who have studied for a number of years at a conservatoire. Do you feel inferior; do you feel that they see you from above?

There are two types of musicians. Those who protect their formal education and those who are focussed on the core of communication. I don't have to tell you which of these it is rewarding to work with. And I don't have to repeat words such as artistic honesty again, do I! If we go to the bottom of artistic co-operation – all types of co-operation, I suppose – it is a question of human respect. Artists on stage need to respect each other as human beings in order to reflect anything of interest to the audience – to *shine*, as I like to express it. I also dare say it is easy for me to co-operate with others because I'm not a griot, someone who is responsible for a particular tradition. Having said that, I should add that when co-operating with Western musicians, we very often find inspiration in my musical roots. In other words, I'm not in any way denying the musical tradition I grew out from.

In Norway most musicians are offered a lot of opportunities all through their lives. It starts with music schools in every municipality where children can learn to play the violin or saxophone. Then there are conservatoires and competitions and stipends and various types of funds for artistic projects, all aimed at supporting those who want to make a career as a performer. I know that you didn't have similar opportunities when you came to Norway as a young man with your do-do and finger piano. What do you think about that in a democracy which prides itself that it offers equal opportunities to all?

Let me say that for me personally, a stipend which would give me the opportunity to pull back for a year, reflect, work on myself, go deeper in what I'm doing, would be the best type of education I could get. I wish there were special funds to support musicians such as myself – and there are quite a few of us in Norway now – musicians who have come to become professionals through a different path than the western path which takes you from one school to the next. Each of us has different wishes, but as freelancers it's impossible for us not to take the gigs we get all the time. As I said before, Rikskonsertene has meant a lot to me. I hope Rikskonsertene also in the future will have the funds and the will to experiment with artists who may be different from those they already know, and to give them opportunities to develop musical concepts. And I wish other musical organisations would do that as well. I believe we will be able to give back value for money to Norwegian audiences. It is important that musical institutions have their radars going all the time in search for artists and musical expressions they don't even know exist. But the worst thing that may happen, is that musical expressions are presented as something exotic. That won't help us as musicians, it won't help the music, and it won't help the audiences. Equal opportunities to me first of all mean that all musical expressions are given the same chance to live in society as genuine results of human creation.

This is easy to say and quite difficult to do. Just think about it; the fact that my name is Kouame Sereba is in itself an obstacle for my music to be treated equally to the music of those whose names are Tom Hansen or Kari Pettersen. But rest assured, I don't plan to change my name...

Text by Einar Solbu