



The New York Flute Club

NEWSLETTER

November 2003

Meet Sylvain Leroux and the Fula Flute Ensemble



Members of the Fula Flute Ensemble: Peter Fand (bass), Sylvain Leroux (tambin), Yacouba Sissoko (kora), Famoro Dioubate (balafon), and Bailo Bah (tambin).

Interview by Linda Wetherill

This interview took place over the phone one morning in late September, but really began in July (when I learned that Sylvain Leroux's West African flute ensemble was going to perform for the NYFC). I invited Sylvain to hear an African-American/Chinese hybrid concerto premiere at my summer "Global Workshop" at Adelphi University, and he invited me to hear his vital composition of salient West African elements presented by Central Park Brass (in Central Park). It became clear that the primordial, magical tone of the tambin [Fulani flute] had seduced him into an influential, creative vortex.

LINDA WETHERILL: You were a student of classical flute in your hometown of Montreal, but your career has evolved into quite different musical directions.

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In Concert

THE FULA FLUTE ENSEMBLE

Bailo Bah and Sylvain Leroux, tambins
Famoro Dioubate, balafon
Raul Rothblatt, cello

Sunday, **November 23, 2003**, 5:30 pm
CAMI Hall, 165 West 57th Street

DOUGA — Epic song relating the myth of the magical four-winged vulture. A piece generally performed for dignitaries, heads of state and otherwise powerful people.

YANKADI — Song of joy. "Everyone is happy!"

TAMBIN SOLO by Bailo Bah — PEUL MUSIC

CHEDO — The story of Djanke Wali, animist Mandinko King, and his war against the Muslim Fulanis. He was burned along with his village at the conclusion of a brutal war.

BALAFON SOLO by Famoro Dioubate

PRELUDE TO BACH'S CELLO SUITE IN G MAJOR —
An idea of Raul Rothblatt, this duet features the tambin improvising over the famous Bach solo cello piece.

TAMBIN SOLO by Sylvain Leroux —
Composition-improvisation, demonstrating the application of the expressive techniques of the tambin to the modern flute.

TERIYA — Composition by Sylvain Leroux integrating elements of French folk music.

FOLIKE — Let's play!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

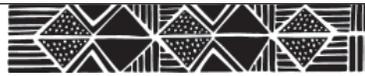
Program subject to change.

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The Tambin

by Sylvain Leroux



The tambin is a three-hole transverse flute made from a vine, also called tambin, which grows exclusively in eastern Guinea and northern Ivory Coast. While the tambin flute is related in style and performance concept to other Fula flutes in other parts of West Africa, such as Mali and Niger, it is different in that it is based on the diatonic scale as opposed to the various pentatonic scales used by its cousins.

The Malinkes (a group related to the Mandeng family, and better known as Mandingo, the people of the Empire of Mali) in this eastern region of Guinea are well known for their highly developed diatonic music. In addition to their world-famous kora and balafon music, they also play a version of the tambin. This suggests that the tambin may have been the result of musical/cultural cross-pollination between the flutes of the Fulas and the diatonic music of the Malinkes in eastern Guinea. But this remains to be determined.

The harvesting of tambin is a venture fraught with perils. The tambin is a vine, which runs through trees, along the forest floor, and down into the water; poisonous snakes may hide beneath and the plant itself has dangerous barbs that may penetrate the skin all the way to the bone. Tambin grows as individual cones, one inside the other. After sections are cut, the cones are separated over fire and it may happen that trapped gasses explode when heated.

Otherwise, the fabrication is fairly easy and straightforward. The bottom of the cone of the vine is cut open, the embouchure and finger holes are carved.



The top, by the embouchure, is plugged with a piece of calabash. Wax is then applied to seal the plug and on each side of the embouchure to form the wings.

The tambin material is very light and fragile, so it is often wrapped in leather or in brightly colored tape. Reinforcing the body in this way has the dual purpose of protecting the flute and making it more responsive...while enhancing its looks. Further maintenance consists of periodic oiling, which further strengthens it.

Tambin playing is associated with dance and acrobatics. It is a highly exuberant form of musical/artistic expression, the performer executing forward and backward flips, rotating on his head and displaying various impressive physical routines while playing, singing and screaming in the flute, thereby adding to the overall excitement generated.

While playing, the flutist might comment and tell stories, talking into the instrument. Speaking of a successful performance, he might say: "Today, everybody understood what I said in the flute." This adds to the emotional content of the music by making the intervention topical.

The tambin is also known as a shepherd's instrument used to communicate with the herd, grazing in the mountains. For example, at the end of the day, the shepherd might blow into his flute to call the sheep or cows home.

The tambin produces a characteristic, haunting sound and induces deep and emotional associations in the listener. Someone who has spent time in the Fouta Djallon can never forget it. □



Register 1	Register 2	Register 3	Register 4
octave	5th	4th	

PHOTOS AND FINGERING CHART ADAPTED FROM WWW.FULAFUTE.NET



LEROUX (cont'd from page 1)

Could you tell us what kindled your interest in mastering the tambin?

SYLVAIN LEROUX: From a very early age, I was attracted to black music...starting with "The Twist" that I heard on the school bus in the early '60s, to rock, blues, jazz, etc. I encountered African music in the late '70s, in Montreal, in the person of Malian percussionist Yaya Diallo, who initiated me into some of the ways of his culture. Because his father was Peul (or Fulani), Yaya loved the flute and made a lot of space for it in his music. One day, he played for me a recording of a speech by Sekou Touré (the late president of Guinea). It was accompanied by a background of tambin music, and I was floored.... I loved the sound, the phrasing and the energy. From that point on I started to incorporate, more or less consciously, that same feeling in my playing. However, I did not seek to study that instrument immediately...it seems the instrument sought me; through a long and intricate set of events I found myself in Conakry (the capital of Guinea) in 1995 studying the tambin and nothing has ever been the same since....

LW: Where did you acquire your first Fulani flute?

SL: In Conakry, from my first teacher, Kikala Diakité.

LW: Can the tambin be bought and studied here in NYC?

SL: It is possible, but difficult, to acquire a tambin in America. I am working on this problem and in the near future I hope to develop a reliable supply of quality instruments. As far as I know, the only teachers of the tambin in New York, or in America for that matter, are Bailo [Bah] and me.

LW: What was the traditional role of the tambin in Fula? How long has this flute been played there? As a side-blown flute, is it a derivative or predecessor of the ney [a Middle Eastern native flute]?

SL: The Fulanis, also known as Peuls, are a large ethnic group spread throughout West Africa and beyond. They are traditionally nomadic herders of animals (cows, goats, sheep, etc.)—although that has become less true [lately]—so flutes, being light, suit their traditional migrating ways. (They also play a [one-stringed] violin-like instrument called the nyanyeru, a flute [with two tubes attached to a resonator] called the tunni, and assorted percussion instruments.) The Peuls are associated with flutes most everywhere they go. And they play a variety of them: for example, in Mali they have two-, three-,...up to six-hole transverse flutes (shorter than the tambin), and in Cameroon there is a transverse flute with no finger holes that is played by women.

The tambin is particular to the Fouta Djallon region, the highlands of Guinea. It would seem that the interaction between the Peul and Malinke cultures in that region may be responsible for the development of the tambin, but I cannot say for sure. No one seems to know how long the tambin has existed, how it was developed, or how it is related to other flutes. There are scholars looking into these questions, so maybe we will get answers soon.

LW: What sort of scale does the tambin play? With only 3 holes, how do you play the musical concepts you wish to express?

SL: The tambin plays a full octave-and-a-half of a diatonic major scale, so one can play most famous western melodies on it. Depending on how the instrument is made, the scale will be closer to, or farther from, our familiar major scale. Although the instrument may appear rather limited, especially compared to the western flute with its three chromatic octaves, the tambin offers tremendous expressive possibilities. It has a very rich sound, and by adding vocal interactions to it, the sky is the limit! It may not be the best

instrument to handle jazz improvisation with complex harmonies, for example, but in the proper context, and in skilled hands, it has an extraordinary range.



LW: In concert, do you usually play several flutes of differing pitches and materials to achieve a variety of tonal centers and colors?

SL: With my [African jazz] group Source, I use two tambins; one in G and one in A flat. With the Fula Flute Ensemble I usually only use the G flute. In terms of materials, so far I have been using only the traditional tambin which is made from a vine (also called the tambin!), but I know of instruments made of bamboo, aluminum and PVC.

LW: It would seem to me that this is an entirely new instrument to learn; the fingering systems are a complete departure from the Western flute. What were the challenges in realizing your African voice?

SL: The tambin is not a new instrument for a flutist. The fingerings are simple and the embouchure is fundamentally the same. It requires little time to get around the instrument and play basic pieces. It takes a bit longer to get control of the multiphonics that give the tambin its characteristic voice. However, for the Western flutist, the challenge is mostly one of language and concept. The hardest part for me is that as a classically trained player, I have learned to subdivide rhythms and harmonically analyze

(Cont'd on next page)



LEROUX (cont'd from previous page)

melodies, which tends to limit my perceptions. The traditional player will think in terms of language and perform rhythms and accentuation that I can't understand. One has to turn off the analytical side of the brain and try to reproduce what one hears without thinking. It is very much like learning to pronounce another language.

LW: Are there techniques of the modern flute that are applicable to playing the tambin?

SL: Well, the tambin is a flute, so the fundamental techniques are equivalent. However, a rich and complex language—developed through the ages, and using the full potential of the instrument—already exists. Since I have not yet mastered it, I hesitate to fool around, but I do a little (and receive disapproving stares from Bailo!).

LW: Does one articulate the same way on African and modern flutes?

SL: Fundamental flute techniques apply to the tambin: posture, tonguing, breathing, etc.

LW: What about vibrato?

SL: The tambin is played without deliberate vibrato.

LW: Will you and the members of the Fula Flute Ensemble be demonstrating tambin techniques in your NYFC presentation?

SL: We will demonstrate all of these techniques and will also answer the audience's questions.

LW: When you teach the tambin, how do you do it?

SL: I have taught classes to individuals and groups and have created recorded lessons for far-away students.

LW: Are there aspects of this flute that may be incorporated into performance on the modern flute?

SL: Yes—blending with the human voice and producing powerful multiphonics. Though the tambin's

physical structure makes it more receptive to this, the modern flute can do pretty well at it [too]. As a benefit, I found that to sing what I am playing opens a door to my inner voice and helps to integrate the mental, emotional and physical aspects of the art of playing.

LW: How do you practice?

SL: I mostly find that I get the best result when I just pick it up and play what is in my heart. I work on register shifts and multiphonics as well as on different ways of talking, singing and screaming into it.

LW: Do you ever attempt Western classics upon the tambin to broaden its vocabulary? I have Mozart concertos recorded on the naiu [East European pan pipes], and I have heard of people preparing orchestral excerpts on ethnic flutes as well.

SL: Most of my practice is to learn traditional pieces from recordings and improvising accompaniments and solos. However, a collaborator of mine, the cellist Raul Rothblatt, created a piece where I improvise on the tambin over the Prelude from Bach's Partita in G major. It is pretty successful. The piece was recorded and will be released this fall.

LW: Do you still perform upon your modern flute?

SL: All the time.

LW: I heard a wonderful piece of yours this summer composed for the Central Park Brass. Have you composed for the Fula Flute Ensemble?

SL: Yes, we currently have two of my compositions in our repertoire and will be adding more in the future.

LW: How do your compositions compare with contemporary compositions that attempt to incorporate traditional West African elements?

SL: Most of my compositions are extremely simple. A melody, a bass line and chord structure (or not) and let's play! Each musician interpreting the piece through his or her own feelings. If the composition is emotionally and spiritually potent, the interpreter will be moved to compose accompaniment and

solo material that the composer could never have thought of, so the composition is enriched in this way.

The Central Park Brass piece is an exception. It was a commission and it forced me to put my concepts down on paper and to specifically articulate my ideas. I think that the experience was successful and I hope that it will lead to more opportunities. I certainly have more ideas....

LW: What African elements do you consider most identifiable or unique?

SL: I consider "groove," a feeling that arises when certain cyclical patterns are performed, to be the most important aspect of African music. Groove is an ineffable quality but players and the audience know what it is when it happens: it just feels great. The African influence on American music is very obvious in those terms.

LW: How did the group get started?

SL: The idea at the origin of the Fula Flute Ensemble was to bring traditional West African instruments into the concert hall. Events that started to bring this about occurred as early as 1994. The rest was a natural evolution of getting more deeply involved into the music and meeting the right musicians. The meeting with Bailo Bah, our master tambin player, was fortuitous and crucial. Without him, we would have never attempted to make the Fula Flute CD.

LW: Do you use traditional Fuli instrumentation?

SL: The instrumentation of our ensemble is not Fulani; the balafon (xylophone) and the kora (harp-lute) are Mandeng instruments and the upright bass is not African. So the ensemble is a hybrid. There does not seem to be a set way of doing things in Africa, the rule being: If it sounds good, it's fine! We [try] to make the sound of the group inviting for a Western audience, as well as pleasing and inspiring to ourselves. I am not aware of any critics unhappy with our instrumentation.

LW: Once you started performing, how did you arrange performance dates?

SL: We have gotten a lot of help and encouragement from the World Music Institute. We performed in WMI sponsored events several times in the last few years and it was always successful. The people at WMI progressively recommended us around. We had the good fortune to be selected for a Chamber Music America showcase last year and it helped to get the ball rolling.

LW: I see that you were among the first to perform in Zankel Hall. How did the audience there react to your music? How did this compare to audience reaction and interaction in West Africa?

SL: It was a real honor to be included in the historic event of the opening of Zankel Hall, to share the stage with the luminaries who were performing on the same program. The response was warm and welcoming and we received a lot of positive feedback. We are now looking forward to our performance there next February 28th.

The Fula Flute Ensemble has not performed in West Africa but our CD was enthusiastically received there. In Guinea, the national radio is using some of our CD's tracks as background music for traditional tales, as well as regularly programming it for airplay. A dance company from Burkina Faso, the Compagnie Tà, is currently using the

track "Bani" in performance. In general, Africans personally gave me tremendous encouragement and support whenever I played for them. When they see me play, the usual reactions are shock and delight.

LW: I know you have been very active in the jazz arena for a long time and you currently also direct the African jazz group Source. Are there professional skills from your jazz experience that have been incorporated with the Fula group?

SL: Improvisation would probably be the most obvious of these skills. Other than that, it would be difficult to pinpoint one or other...everything blending into the general experience acquired through all the years. The contexts in which these two ensembles perform are generally different, but Source could play concert halls and the Fula Flute Ensemble could play clubs.

LW: What is the most challenging aspect of performing with the Fula Flute Ensemble?

SL: To try to play an interesting tambin solo after Bailo Bah has finished his! He is such a great master of the instrument that it can be intimidating to try to add something to his articulate and powerful musical statements.

LW: How has this career impacted your life in extramusical ways?

SL: I have many African friends and I have learned to appreciate and love their culture: food, fun, spirituality, etc. I have what I now consider family in West Africa. I often try to help my African friends navigate the very complicated waters of our western society so I get to see our somewhat insane, complicated world through their eyes.

LW: Thank you so much! We all look forward to hearing you in November.



Linda Wetherill (www.LindaWetherill.com) is professor of flute at Adelphi University. During the last two decades she has toured as soloist for USIS through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, from a base in Istanbul as a lecturer in world and contemporary music at Bogazici University. A concerto and research tour of mainland China in 2002 began a new wave of research into music of the Pacific Rim.

For more about Sylvain Leroux and the Fula Flute Ensemble, visit www.fulaflute.net; for more about the World Music Institute (WMI), visit www.worldmusicinstitute.org.