

BARBARA B. SMITH
WORLD MUSIC SERIES

OUMOU SANGARÉ

Friday, April 19, 2024
Kilbourn Hall
7:30 PM



EASTMAN
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY of ROCHESTER

PROGRAM

Selections to be announced from the stage.

MEET THE ARTIST

Since the release of her debut album *Moussoulou* in 1989, there's been no respite for the Malian singer **Oumou Sangaré**. Notable waymarks on her rich and fruitful journey include some of the most definitive recordings in the history of contemporary African music, all released on the World Circuit label: *Ko Sira* in 1993, *Worotan* in 1996 and *Seya* in 2009, the latter nominated for a Grammy in the Best World Music Album category. Numerous international tours and performances on prestigious stages such as the Sydney Opera House, London's Queen Elizabeth Hall and Tokyo's Nippon Budokan complete this roll of honour.



Timbuktu, the first release on her own Oumsang label, is the latest act in this unparalleled musical epic, one that World Circuit has become associated with once again. It consecrates this artist who rose up from the poor neighbourhoods of Bamako to become a global superstar and universally admired feminist icon. With the powerful aura of a Grace Jones, black transgressive icon par excellence, Oumou has long since broken through the barriers that separate continents and musical styles. She was once invited by Alicia Keys to sing a duet on TV, and today, she gets held up as an example by artists as hefty as Aya Nakamura, who dedicated the song *Oumou Sangaré* to her in 2017, or Beyoncé, who sampled one of Oumou's most famous creations, *Diaraby Néné*, for her song *Mood 4 Eva*, which was included in the soundtrack of the film *The Lion King: The Gift* in 2019.

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Oumou Sangaré's career was being driven forward at a rapid pace and without even the slightest pause when it hit a major interruption thanks to the health crisis of 2020. In March of that year, just after the International Wassoulou Festival (FIWA), an event Oumou launched in 2016 to promote her birth region in southern Mali, she went to the United States. She'd only planned to stay a few weeks but then lockdown came, first in New York, then in Baltimore, a place where she quickly felt at home. "Something in that city drew me in straightaway. I felt so good there that I wanted to buy a house." Once settled into her new abode, she spent her days writing songs with the help of an old friend, Mamadou Sidibé, who has been Oumou Sangaré's kamele n'goni (traditional lute) player since the very beginning.

This period of enforced seclusion gave birth to ten of the eleven songs on *Timbuktu*. The album weaves intimate sonic connections between traditional instruments from West Africa and those linked to the history of the blues, most notably the kamele n'goni and its distant heirs, the Dobro and slide guitar, played here by Pascal Danaë, who co-produced the album with Nicolas Quéré. From that particular period of lockdown, when time itself was put on hold, so to speak, and when both Oumou the artist and Oumou the businesswoman suddenly experienced a hitherto unknown state of isolation, far from the tumult and incessant solicitations of normal life, she pulled out the best.

"Since 1990, I've never had a chance to cut myself off from the world and devote myself exclusively to music," she says. "If you look at it that way, lockdown was an opportunity for me, because it allowed me to keep my focus on the work of composition. I think you feel it in music, but also in the lyrics which are fruit of all those moments when I was able to withdraw into myself and meditate."

It's true. Never have Oumou Sangaré's lyrics achieved such a poetic quality, such depth. Never have we seen her so inspired to deliver up her thoughts on the indecipherable mysteries of existence, the perilous situation that her country is going through right now or the general condition of the African womanhood, all proof that despite becoming so powerful, she hasn't renounced the belief and commitment of her youth. So many feelings and moods nourish this album, from the introspection of *Degui N'Kelena* to the amorous languor of *Kanou*, the compassion of *Demissim*, the exasperation of *Kélé Magni* or the pride of *Wassulu Don*. Taking a conclusive step forward with the sonic approach devised by Danaë and Quéré, which adapts the dynamism of traditional Wassoulou rhythms to the language of contemporary music, *Timbuktu* looks set to become the most ambitious and accomplished work in an already eminent discography.

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Although the title of the album, *Timbuktu*, alludes to the political situation in Mali, a country facing total disintegration and looking deep into its own history (powerfully symbolised by that legendary trading town in the northern desert) for reasons to be hopeful, many of its songs are based on Oumou's own unique experience. When, in *Sira* (literally 'the baobab' in Bambara), she sings about the offspring of well-heeled and erudite families who, despite all their advantages, lapse into delinquency and throw away a promising future, it's almost unconsciously to underline the contrasting and exemplary nature of her own trajectory.

Born in Bamako on February 2nd, 1968, Oumou Sangaré is the eldest daughter of a Fulani family from the Wassoulou region of southern Mali. Her mother, Aminata Diakité, was a singer, and so was her grandmother Noumouténé. Oumou barely knew her father, Diari Sangaré, who left the family home when Oumou was two years old. Having been abandoned in this way, her mother Aminata became a market trader to keep her four children alive. Oumou would help her by selling little sachets of water in the street. She got into the habit of following her mother to the soumous (nuptial or baptismal ceremonies held in the street) where Aminata would sing to appreciative crowds. Oumou soon earned herself a portion of that prestige, thanks to the clarity and strength of a voice that, gushing forth from the body of a child, enchanted its audience. Then, during an inter-school competition where Oumou was representing her school in the Daoudabougou neighbourhood, she got the chance to hog all the glory by singing in front of 3,000 people at the Omnisports Stadium in Bamako and winning first prize.

She already had a long career behind her when, aged 18, she went to Abidjan to record her first cassette, produced by Abdoulaye Samassa (who had to offer her a car to entice her into the studio). Re-released on CD and vinyl by World Circuit 2016, the cassette, entitled *Moussolou* ('the women' in Bambara), sold more than 250,000 copies on its first release, a record that remains unbeaten in West Africa. Though this feat can partly be explained by the highly danceable nature of Wassoulou music, the most important elements were the lyrics that are sung, sometimes roared, by this young lioness who had to struggle from an early age to survive. Standing up with ardent passion against the abuses of a patriarchal tradition that sanctions polygamy, forced marriage and female genital mutilation, Oumou became the overnight face of a feminist cause that never had any kind of foothold in this part of the world before she came along.

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Her career and her recordings remained branded by these two salient dimensions: being a woman and coming from a social background that made her singularly sensitive to all forms of injustice. *Timbuktu* is a case in point. Take *Gniani Sara* (literally ‘the reward of suffering’), which speaks of Oumou’s never-ending struggle for the betterment of the female condition. “I dared to tackle this subject first, before anyone else, and even risked my life doing it,” she says today. “My reward was to awaken consciences, especially among the younger generation. To see Aya Nakamura or Beyoncé cite me as an example is worth all the prizes and all the distinctions in the world.”

Nonetheless, being the biggest and most influential female African singer alive was never enough for her. For the past thirty years, Oumou has managed to shine bright in the worlds of business and social action. Founder and head of several companies involved in hospitality, agriculture and car retail (through her brand Oum Sang), she currently employs close to 200 people full time. Then there’s the Oumou Sangaré foundation, set up 10 years ago to support women and children in difficulty, where she’s busy putting the finishing touches to a work of art, so to speak, one that’s never far from humanitarian convictions. She has also been elevated to the rank of Commander of the National Order of Mali and dubbed Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres de la République Française. And in 2003, she became Good Will Ambassador for the FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation) after receiving the UNESCO prize two years earlier.

But all this success has come at heavy price. Not only did Oumou suffer among the cruelest possible wounds any child can suffer, including abandonment and extreme misery, today she has to protect herself from the evils that notoriety attracts, including jealousy, calumny and betrayal, scourges that she evokes in the song *Sarama* and urges herself to move beyond in *Dily Oumou*. Arising from them is the loneliness of the song *Degui N’Kelena*, in which themes of separation and loss are crystallised, as is Oumou’s intent to deal with them all in a stoical manner, welcoming each new trial with a pro-active lucidity. She draws this strength entirely from the music, whose power in turn derives from that of the Wassoulou hunters who created it centuries ago. In fact, the brotherhood of those hunters, who are known as Donsow (Donso in the singular), is the bedrock of the rhythms used by all modern singers from Wassoulou, who have been baptised kònò or ‘the birds’. The emblematic instrument of this repertoire is the donso-ngoni, which was modernised in 1950s to become the kamele n’goni (‘young person’s harp’). It’s been the bedrock of all Oumou’s songs to this day. Like a guide vocal, Mamadou Sidibe’s kamele n’goni structures all the compositions on *Timbuktu* and, with its pentatonic

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tonalities, elicits superb and unexpected flourishes from the guitar of Pascal Danaë. By using a Harmony Stratotone on *Wassulu Don* (literally ‘the culture of Wassoulou’), a dobro resonator on *Degui N’Kelena* and *Sarama*, or bottleneck on *Sira*, Danaë seems to return in each instance to the metallic tones that are so characteristic of the kamele n’goni, thereby weaving an intoxicating complicity between musical styles and continents.

Considering her past, there’s can nothing random or arbitrary about the themes of suffering and facing down adversity that run through Oumou’s repertoire. The dominance of these themes is probably a distant echo of the abuses that some hunters inflict on themselves during their ceremonies to try and master their pain, going so far as to swallow burning embers or dance and stab themselves with knives while singers invoke supernatural forces. It’s this steely confidence that *Wassulu Don* is referring to, this universally relevant culture with its earthy foundations, celebrated here by its most famous representative, a singer who in the manner of the greatest of the great – Aretha Franklin or Nina Simone – sublimates pain and, more than ever, illuminates music with her own genius. Not only African music but all music.

“Music is within me,” Oumou declares. “Without it, I’m nothing, and nothing can take it away from me! I’ve put my life into this record, my whole life—this life in which I’ve known hunger, the humiliation of poverty and fear, and from which today, I draw glory.”

— *Francis Dorder, translation by Andy Morgan*

We acknowledge with respect the Seneca Nation, known as the “Great Hill People” and “Keepers of the Western Door” of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We take this opportunity to thank the people whose ancestral lands the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester currently occupies in Rochester, New York.

UPCOMING EASTMAN SERIES CONCERTS

Tickets for all series concerts can be purchased at EastmanTheatre.org

BARBARA B. SMITH WORLD MUSIC SERIES

Gamelan

Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre
Monday, April 29, 2024 at 7:30 PM

Gamelan at Eastman, as in Bali, is a communal effort. Members include Eastman students, faculty, and staff, as well as many members of the Rochester community. The music is learned through the oral/aural tradition without the use of notation, and therefore requires the players to work together closely for long periods of time. The result is a sense of group unity and pride as the audience hears the music and witnesses the collective efforts of the ensemble.

*This concert does not require tickets and is free to attend.

DISTINGUISHED VISITING ARTIST

Jeff Beal – New York Études

Hatch Recital Hall
Monday, May 6, 2024 at 7:30 PM

The New York Études, ten new works for solo piano, were composed in the months after Beal relocated to New York City in 2021. Meditative, rich, and complex, each piece develops reflective melodies and harmonic gestures that reveal a master's understanding of voice leading and harmony. These works showcase Beal's compositional gift like never before.

*This concert does not require tickets and is free to attend.

UPCOMING STUDENT ENSEMBLE CONCERTS

All student performances are free unless otherwise noted.

Chamber Music Extravaganza

Hatch Recital Hall
Saturday, April 27, 2024 – Monday, April 29, 2024
See our website for full schedule of events!

Eastman New Jazz Ensemble

Kilbourn Hall
Monday, April 29, 2024 at 7:30 PM



For the most up to date information on Eastman concerts and events, scan this code to visit our online calendar.



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