

MODERN CLASSICS

Reality singing contests, YouTube and MySpace are spitting out instant musical sensations at a rate of knots but increasingly, young hopefuls are turning to classical training. Nana Ocran meets three West African musicians for whom putting in the years of practice for their art has paid off.



Tunde Jegede

Kora player

Tunde Jegede is a man with diverse musical talents. With numerous titles – composer, author, multi-instrumentalist, producer and master kora player – he seems fairly humble about this last label, despite being known inside and outside the UK for his exquisite skills with the Malian instrument. ‘I’ll leave other people to say that’, he says with a smile. ‘To master an instrument is a lifelong thing’.

He was an early starter though. By the age of nine he was studying music in Gambia with age-old kora players, and had traveled to Ghana and Senegal on the same musical mission. Coming from a supremely creative family – his father is the artist and poet Taiwo Jegede, and his younger sister Maya Jobarteh is also a kora player and vocalist – he was something of a child prodigy, with a self-penned book *The Silent Voice* written when he was just 14.

Interestingly, he’s collaborated in various countries across a broad spectrum of musical genres from jazz to hip hop and pop, and although he’s long been involved in composing for classical music he draws a clear distinction between what he sees as ‘black people who play classical music’ and ‘African Classical Music’.

Jegede: ‘When I was studying piano, I remember saying to my teacher at the Guildhall that I played African Classical Music and she kept saying, “you mean African and Classical Music”. She couldn’t put the words together without using “and”. I was 17 or 18 and I thought... hmm. Interesting’.

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With a passion for Africa’s ancient musical cultures, Jegede goes on to explain, ‘African Classical Music comes from something. I’m talking about antiquity and the connections between Egypt and Greece and how Egypt relates to the contemporary African instrument. There’s a whole history to that. Black people have been playing western classical music for hundreds of years and that’s fine, but I make a very serious distinction between that and African Classical Music. It’s a bit confusing, but it’s not the same – at all.’

Steeped with a particular vision, Jegede set up the African Classical Music Ensemble, with whom he recorded the current album, *There Was a Time*. Recorded in Mali and featuring the legendary Malian vocalist, Kasse Mady Diabate, the Gambian Kora maestro, Wali Cham and the Guinean flutist, Amadou Barre it is a mesmerising example of African music traditions, highlighting acoustic classical sounds that hark back to the old code of griots.

Jegede embodies a musical world that straddles ancient Africa and contemporary Europe, and so it’s fitting that he’s now become the subject of a film *The World of Tunde Jegede*, which documents his whole story, and should be released in its completed form in the spring of 2011.

Tunde Jegede’s music is available from iTunes and the CD *There Was a Time* is available at www.africanclassicalmusic.com

Josephine Amankwah

Mezzo-soprano

When asked about her early singing days, mezzo-soprano Josephine Amankwah recalls her performance in actor and theatre director Simon Callow’s *Carmen Jones* opera at the Old Vic in London’s West End. ‘I was so excited, so happy and overwhelmed that I had been chosen out of hundreds of people to play one of the small parts in this show. It was such an amazing feeling to perform and be a part of such a fantastic production’ she says.

As far as tracing her route to classical music, it was her families’ influence that seemed to set her on her path. ‘My grandfather was a great pianist so I grew up listening to a lot of choral and classical music and loved it’ she says. ‘From a young age my parents encouraged me to sing and perform on stage. We would go to see live performances at the Royal Festival Hall, the Purcell Room, Wigmore Hall...’.

Having music in her bones is one thing, but is hers a voice that was always suited to the ‘middle’ operatic level? ‘I have a large vocal range,’ she explains. ‘When I first started singing I was doing repertoire for a soprano, but as my voice developed it grew in size, depth and richness and a darker, violet tone became more established, which was better suited to that of a mezzo-soprano.’

Regular training, good guidance and a willingness to practice are crucial elements of the discipline that have seen her maintain her voice as well as her success as an artist. Quite a few musical icons have inspired her along the way, with Greek soprano Maria Callas being one of them.





future project includes one in which she is looking to produce a programme explaining the traditional folk-singing cultures of Ghana and West Africa. 'It's a work in progress,' she says. 'I'm still collecting a lot of music at this stage, with the view to bring it into the mainstream'. www.joamankwah.com

Juwon Ogungbe

Baritone and Composer

I couldn't ever just be a classical singer. I'll always want to compose because that way there's a sensibility I can express that not many other people are privy to.' So says Juwon Ogungbe when asked his views about his profession.

A London-born composer and baritone singer, Ogungbe was first drawn to music during his secondary school days, which were spent in Nigeria. 'There was some music education in the school system there', he says. 'Some of it was to do with compositions of African composers, while some was the standard repertoire. I didn't specifically get vocal training at that time, but I always sang'.

Along Ogungbe's musical journey he's taken inspiration from some of Africa's pioneering musicians including Fela Sowande, who's considered the father of modern Nigerian musical traditions, as well as the composer and pianist Akin Euba and composer and organist Ayo Bankole. 'These are Yoruba but there are others including ethnomusicologist Joshua Uzoigbe and Ghanaians Sam Akpabot and Ephraim Amu', he says. 'Basically, there was a kind of scene that we were aware of at school in Lagos, and sometimes musicians would come and perform for us'.

However, by the time Ogungbe reached University in the UK, classical music had lost some of its lustre. He says: 'I wanted to break away and do my own thing because of my composing, but then I started taking singing lessons, which led to me joining an opera company'.

These days Ogungbe has a very versatile career that includes directing and composing music for theatre, leading young people in singing groups and workshops, as well as recently being the compere for the well-established London African Music Festival, whose huge lineup included King Sunny Ade, Osibisa, the Master Drummers of Africa, MC Solaar, Cheik Seck and Carmen Souza.

Creating his own series of repertoires, partly based on his early African influences, his performances have included adaptations of Nigerian Juju and Highlife, often played in scaled down versions using a percussionist.

Working with young people is an extra string to his bow, and back in 2005 he wrote a piece that was commissioned by London's South Bank. A song cycle for young people to sing, over 3,000 children in three performances performed it. Ogungbe: 'I've also been trying for ages to set up something in Lagos. The MUSON centre is there. They put on theatre shows that Lagosians go to, but let's see...'

In the meantime, he continues to sing for a broad range of opera companies and this year he formed the Juwon Ogungbe Trio, who perform his songs throughout London. www.juwonogungbe.co.uk

Amankwah: 'Whenever I listen to her sing I am overwhelmed by her rich and soulful voice. Also Marilyn Horne - one of the finest mezzo-sopranos of the 20th century. She has a brilliant sound and extraordinary range. Her career has spanned from Grand Opera to Jazz and pop singles. I've been very fortunate to have sung for her in a master class she held for young singers in California.'

But then, Amankwah is no slouch when it comes to her own track record. Like most performers, she straddles multiple creative worlds, writing and directing being two more skills she's developed. 'These are areas I have recently started', she says. 'For me it's a natural progression from where I began and I'm really excited that with my experience in performing I'm able to move confidently in these fields.'

And then there's her move into television. Amankwah: 'My agent encouraged me to audition for acting roles. When you sing you act, so it was a language I understood. I did learn that the discipline for acting on TV is different than when you are performing on stage. You use your voice more when on stage and less when filming.'

One of my most challenging and favourite roles was playing the astronaut Tyler in *Life on Mars* for Channel 4. The end result was much greater than I could have wished for'.

It seems that the world's her musical oyster, and a

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