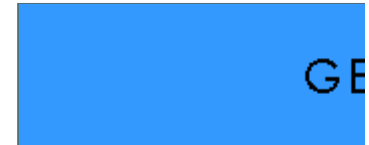




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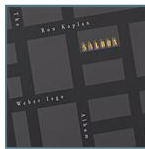
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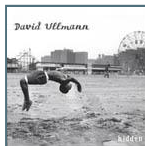
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New Ancient Strings

Toumani Diabate with Ballake Sissoko | Hannibal Records

By [Nils Jacobson](#)

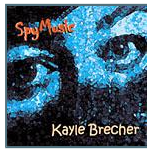
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Listeners who celebrate the music of today would do well to appreciate its roots. In the case of West African music, that means turning from Afro-pop and Afro-beat back to the traditional music of the Ancient Empire of Mali. The kora, a 21-stringed harp whose history dates back to the 13th century, is represented here. In the modern age, the kora has been eagerly adopted by jazz, flamenco, and electronic music. (Witness Mamadou Diabate's key role on Ben Allison's recent *Peace Pipe*.) That makes sense, given that the instrument has long been used in the context of vocal duets.

Toumani Diabate and Ballake Sissoko are two masters who inherited their musicianship from their fathers through a distant jeli lineage that spans centuries. (The title refers to the very first kora instrumental record, *Ancient Strings*, which was recorded by their fathers in 1970.) They have been next door neighbors in Balako, Mali their whole life. It's only logical, therefore, that they have the kind of mutual understanding that renders justification irrelevant.

New Ancient Strings conveys a blissful sense of peace and devotion. Far from the vacuous tendencies of modern music's "contemporary" or "smooth" sounds, *New Ancient Strings* has the kind of depth that sounds most natural when delivered through understatement. The third track, "Kita Kaira," opens with a sparkling, rippling series of cascades, and then melds into a sparse, paced conversational tone. It's a perfect reflection of the word "Kaira," which means "peace."

The open harmonies of the instrument lend a spacious backdrop for melody, which evolves as a series of phrases that undergo development and reinvention throughout each piece. Regular embellishments (trills,



Kayle Brecher
Spy Music



Chris Abelen
SPACE

accidentals, runs) lend a sort of baroque feel to the music, also endowing it with a sense that the music is very much created in the moment. While these tunes have storied histories, they come back to life through improvisation. And along with improvisation comes conversation, only a natural extension of these two players' relationship in real life.

"Bafoulabe" offers an interesting rhythmic touch through regular tapping of the kora's resonant body. "Kadiatou" sounds the most danceworthy, with its stuttering rhythms and lilting feel.

Diabate is something of a kora ambassador to the world. He's brought the rich sounds of his instrument far outside his home country. And he's branched out—into flamenco, for example. There's no dictum against evolution. But here Diabate and Sissoko remind us of the timeless purity of tradition. Incidentally, *New Ancient Strings* was recorded on September 22, 1997, which is Mali's independence day. Doesn't that tell you something?

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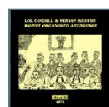
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