

A photograph of a man playing a balafon, a traditional West African stringed instrument. The man is wearing a blue and white patterned shirt and is focused on his performance. The balafon is made of wooden keys and is mounted on a wooden frame. The background is a textured, light-colored wall. The text 'bala' is written in a large, blue, sans-serif font in the upper right corner, and 'Lassana Diabaté' is written in a white, cursive font below it.

bala

Lassana  
Diabaté

## 1. Cape Breton 5:39

I was inspired by the beautiful landscape of Cape Breton, its peacefulness, and the hospitality of its people to compose this piece in its honour.

## 2. Tokonou 4:48

In honour of a town in Guinea, notorious because for its cruel governor during the colonial era — and yet this man somehow ended up having a beautiful song dedicated to him. This is my arrangement.

## 3. Samuel 4:42

I composed this piece as a tribute to the young son of my good friend, Joe Kaiat, a South African pianist with whom I have collaborated many times.

## 4. The Farmer's Tune\* 3:38

My arrangement of a tune called 'Jawura', traditionally played to coordinate the back-breaking work of young farmers as they tilled the land, as well as to honour descendents of Tiramakan, a great warrior who fought alongside Sunjata Keita, emperor of Mali, in the 13th century.

## 5. Sossofoli (Korogba) 3:07

One of my signature pieces, requiring dexterity and complete independence in both hands. Originally from the Sosso people of Guinea, dedicated to the power of traditional healers.

## 6. Nana Triban 3:06

Nana Triban was the half-sister of Sunjata Keita, founder of the Mali empire. A heroine, she helped Sunjata to rise to power and vanquish his rival, Sumaworo Kante, the blacksmith king (and first 'owner' of the balafón).

## 7. Kanou 4:23

Kanou means 'to love'; this piece encourages us to love those who are close to us.

## 8. Hommage à Kassé Mady\* 4:51

Kassé Mady Diabaté was one of Mali's most cherished traditional voices, one of the greatest singers of West Africa, and an exceptional human being. I had the privilege of recording with him on many albums and I pay tribute here to this irreplaceable singer who passed away in 2018.

## 9. Sirfou 4:40

Sirfou means Cherif, a lineage that descends from the Prophet Mohammed. This is a song to make people feel happy and celebrate.

## 10. Kaira 5:49

Kaira means 'peace, joy'. One of the best-known tunes in the traditional repertoire of the Mande griots.

## 11. The Jala Tree\* 5:19

A metaphor for power, this highly symbolic tree of the West African savannah was, prior to Islam, a shrine for prayer and sacrifice.

## 12. Aissata Hommage à Maman 4:57

In this tune, I pay homage to my beloved mother.

## 13. Mariama Siré\* 3:29

Tribute to the beauty of Mariama Siré, wife of one of the last great pre-colonial rulers of the savannah of Mali and Guinea, Almami Samory Touré. Based on a traditional song for the Touré lineage, Keme Bourama.

Songs 1, 3, 6, and 8 composed by Lassana Diabaté. All other songs arranged by Lassana Diabaté.

\*denotes balafón duet with Illya Kierkosz

Fodé Lassana Diabaté is without doubt one of Africa's most brilliant and creative contemporary musicians, and the greatest virtuoso on the balafón (22-key xylophone). Three times Grammy nominated, he has been compared to some of the world's most celebrated musicians. Kronos Quartet director David Harrington likens him to none other than Bach (*The Times*, 09/06/19) and musician/composer David Coulter says that Lassana's playing brings to mind Thelonius Monk.

Lassana was born in 1971 into a well-known griot family of balafón masters, taking up the instrument at the age of five, first learning from his father, Delisory Diabaté, and then apprenticing to other master/mentors.

Lassana's style of playing balafón is highly dexterous and contrapuntal – with extraordinary independence of left and right hands – and unique in its range of expressive tone and lyrical melodies, as well as its rich resonance. He has perfected the complex art of carving and tuning the rosewood keys of the balafón, a craft he learned while growing up in Guinea. He plays two balafóns tuned a semitone apart, so that he can perform chromatic scales; otherwise, the balafóns he makes are unamplified, gourd-resonated, and remain true to the tradition of this instrument in Africa, which is probably 1,000 years old or more.

His professional distinctions are many: accompanist to Mali's top divas; noted recording artist with leading musicians; composer/collaborator with international performers such as the Kronos Quartet and Taj Mahal; music director of Trio Da Kali, a super group of Malian griots; participant in high-profile music projects with support of the Aga Khan Music Initiative and other institutions worldwide. Further to his performance achievements, Lassana has also established Folilakana, a music association in his home country of Mali, dedicated to providing musical education for children, thus ensuring that the art and traditions of the griots are honoured and preserved.

– Lucy Durán, Professor of Music, SOAS, University of London

“I have had the good fortune of traveling a great deal around the world. But every time I come to Cape Breton it makes me very happy... This place inspires me greatly... It was very beautiful.”

*“J’ai eu la chance de beaucoup voyager a travers le monde.  
Mais a chaque fois je vienne a Cap Breton je me sens si heureux...  
Cette ville m’inspire beaucoup... C’était très beau.”*



Cape Breton Island shoreline, Nova Scotia, Canada, February 2017

“It’s a beautiful recording studio: perfect acoustics, and a great engineer. When you’re in the studio, it inspires you to play. And the balafón duets [with] me and Illya... Illya is very intelligent and very precise in his accompaniment. It’s magic.

For someone who had never played the balafón before, he impressed me a great deal.”

*“C’est un très beau studio d’enregistrement.  
Un bon sons acoustique. Et aussi un grand ingénieur... L’acoustique est parfaite. Et aussi le moment du duo Balafón, moi et Illya. Illya est très intelligent et très précis pour ses accompagnes. C’est magique. Quelqu’un qui n’avait jamais jouer le Balafón auparavant. Il m’a beaucoup impressionne.”*



Lassana Diabaté and Illya Kierkosz on balafón, April 2019  
Rotary Music Room, Cape Breton University

*Virtuoso balafón musician Fodé Lassana Diabaté conveys his expressive artistry and lyricism in this collection of original compositions recorded in Canada in 2019.*

*Through his riveting contemporary performance, this revered Malian griot, Grammy nominee and outstanding musical collaborator is a powerful conduit for centuries of profoundly meaningful oral tradition.*

- |                             |                                  |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Cape Breton 5:39         | 8. Hommage à Kassé Mady 4:51     |
| 2. Tokonou 4:48             | 9. Sirfou 4:40                   |
| 3. Samuel 4:42              | 10. Kaira 5:49                   |
| 4. The Farmer's Tune 3:38   | 11. The Jala Tree 5:19           |
| 5. Sossofoli (Korogba) 3:07 | 12. Aissata Hommage à Maman 4:57 |
| 6. Nana Triban 3:06         | 13. Mariama Siré 3:29            |
| 7. Kanou 4:23               |                                  |

Produced by the Centre for Sound Communities in collaboration with the Centre for Cape Breton Studies, Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada

Producer: Marcia Ostashevski, Director, Centre for Sound Communities, Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology, Cape Breton University

Assistant Producer: Mary Beth Carty, with special thanks to Lucy Durán, Professor of Music, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Recording, Mixing and Mastering: Christopher Jones

Concept and Art Design: Darene Roma Yavorsky, Creative Director, The Word & Image Studio    Design Adaptation: Jody Billert, Design Literate Studio LLC

Front Cover Photo: Cosima Spender ©2003    Interior Photos: Marcia Ostashevski



SSHRC



folkways.si.edu  
balafondiabate.ca  
soundcommunities.com

© 2025 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings  
© 2021 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings