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Incredible string blends

By David Honigmann

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Some string instruments have such a strong flavour that they pervade a whole broth. Kenny Garrett's *Beyond The Wall* (Nonesuch), for example, sees the saxophonist's late Coltranean jazz stylings engage with China. On most of the tracks the connection is subliminal. But on the horribly titled "Tsunami Song", on which Garrett switches from saxophone to lyrical piano, the conceit works. The lead melody is taken by Guowei Wang on the erhu, a hoarse, instantly evocative Chinese fiddle. It is the most successful synthesis of Chinese and American music since Greg Edmondson's soundtrack for *Firefly*.

The kora, the many-stringed West African harp, is a stubborn instrument: scintillating on its own, it is reluctant to share the limelight. Ali Farka Touré, legendarily tenacious when it came to defending his own musical space, was wise enough to acknowledge this when he played with Toumani Diabaté on *In The Heart Of The Moon*, and relegated himself to the role of rhythm guitarist, effacing himself out of Diabaté's way.

Foday Muso Susa, a Gambian kora virtuoso, has a history of collaborating with western musicians: to good effect on his and Herbie Hancock's *Village Life*, to less good with Philip Glass on *The Screens*. His new CD *Music From The Hearts Of The Masters* (Kindred Rhythm) shares billing with the percussionist Jack DeJohnette, best known for his work with Miles Davis and Jarrett. DeJohnette, for the most part, adopts Touré's wise practice of remaining in the background. On "Kaira" (the West African equivalent of "Stairway To Heaven") and in particular on "Rose Garden", Suso works fragile magic.

The same instrument sounds different on Ba Cissokho's *Electric Griot Land* (Totolo). As the title suggests, this does for the kora what Jimi Hendrix did for the guitar: Cissokho plays relatively straight but his cousin, Sekou Kouyate, pumps his kora up and distorts it into an electric blur, turning Cissokho's songs about materialism, Pan-Africanism and the role of women into a confrontation between Franz Fanon and Jimmy Page.

The Iranian-American musician Shahrokh Yadegari pulls a similar trick on *Migration* (LilaSound Productions), working with the Tehran-born violinist Keyavash Nourai. Yadegari has developed a software tool that allows him to sample and play back sounds in real time. Originally he used it to duet with a mockingbird in the jasmine tree in his garden, but on *Migration* he plays more serious games updating and reaffirming the canon of the radif, a set of Persian traditional melodies.

Kayhan Kalhor has a more conventional take on the same sounds on *The Wind* (ECM), a collaboration with Erdal Erzincan. Kalhor plays the kamancheh, a bowed spike fiddle (as opposed to Nourai's western violin), and improvises on Persian and Turkish material with Erzincan's plucked baglama, a species of lute. In contrast to *Migration*, this music is spare and bleak. Kalhor's kamancheh is recorded close up, as if it were whispering a millimetre from the microphone.

The Japanese musician Oki Kanno plays the tonkori, a long flat stringed instrument that might be a distant cousin to the kora. His new *Dub Ainu Deluxe* (Chikar Studio), a follow-up to the marvellous limited-edition *Dub Ainu*, sets the wonky, hollow sound of the tonkori (as played by the Ainu from the far north of Japan) amid the treacherous, echoing musical landscape of dub reggae. "Koshi Turiri Dub" has the irritating Space Invader bleeps beloved of Japanese electronic musicians; the rest of the album passes by in a blissful haze, where Hokkaido catches on the horizon a glimpse of Jamaica.

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