

funny would come out. Fortunately, most people, even musicians, learn songs better by ear than by eye. Why is African music transcription so often inaccurate, and so little used in Africa? I conclude that it is mostly because transcribers are held in the grip of the Western music system – this is all that is codified and taught in music school. African music has its own principles and systems too! It is eminently transcribable, if you just start from the right ideas.

Andrew Tracey, ILAM, Rhodes University

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*Siaka, an African Musician*, 80 minutes, DVD. *An African Brass Band*, 72 minutes, DVD. Author and Producer-Director: Hugo Zemp

Selenium Films has released Hugo Zemp's<sup>1</sup> two most recent films about African music, *Siaka, an African Musician* and *An African Brass Band* in DVD format. Both were shot in July and August 2002, a few weeks before the outbreak of the civil war in the Côte d'Ivoire and show the country in peaceful times.

Siaka (pronounced Shaka) Diabate is a musician from Bouake, the second largest city in the Côte d'Ivoire. With a mixed ancestry, he is not a pure Mande griot but considers himself to be one. He certainly has the musical talent to be recognized as an accomplished musician. This film documents Siaka performing with the "Soungalo Group" led by Soungalo Coulibaly while practicing his various instruments and includes interviews with Siaka and Soungalo regarding Siaka's musical history.

Using long continuous shots that give priority to the music and to the commentary, this documentary introduces viewers to the musical talent of Siaka as well as the fascinating world of urban music that incorporates traditional songs and dances by griots in the Côte d'Ivoire. At times employing a *cinéma vérité* style, Zemp manages to make the viewer feel part of the various festivities that he records while presenting a "living portrait of this lovable and highly skilled musician working in a traditional environment" (DVD liner notes).

The logical structure of the film makes for easy viewing. Divided into seven chapters, five of them concentrate on the instruments that Siaka plays expertly, namely the *Senufo* and *Maninka balafons*,<sup>2</sup> the *kora* harp, the *dundun* drum and the electric guitar. Chapter 1 begins with Siaka telling his life story. The English sub-titles are subtle and easy to follow. The viewer is able to take in the interesting shots of Bouake while later freeze-frames of information anticipate well-shot scenes from the various celebrations where Siaka performs. Chapter 2, entitled "The Large *Senufo* Balafon" shows Siaka playing the instrument and relating the charming story of how he learned to play the balafon when

<sup>1</sup> Hugo Zemp is an honorary member of the ethnomusicology Centre of the CNRS at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. He has made numerous documentaries on music in various countries, many which have won awards at international festivals.

<sup>2</sup> Wooden xylophones with gourd resonators.

he was a young boy in Burkina Faso. Zemp then illustrates Siaka's considerable skills by inserting a clip from a wedding celebration where the Senufo balafon is played. The chapter on the little Maninka balafon is set up by interviews with both Siaka and his employer at the time, the accomplished djembe player Soungalo Coulibaly. Coulibaly employed more than forty musicians in the band and, until the time of his death in 2004, was an internationally recognised performer himself. Chapter 3 concentrates on the making of djembe drums (which Coulibaly was also famous for) and is done in a succinct and interesting manner. Accompanied only by drumming, Zemp portrays the various steps of the instrument-making process. There are no long explanations or intricate details but just enough visual information is presented for the viewer to be satisfied. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 follow the same pattern by presenting an interview with Siaka regarding the new instrument being introduced and how he learned to play it, followed by clips showcasing Siaka in action at a professional performance.

What adds another dimension to the film, however, is that information on Siaka is interspersed with him working within his profession as a griot in a traditional environment. The viewer not only learns about the great skill of the musician and about the instruments that Siaka plays but also about music-making in Côte d'Ivoire at the time. My interest was piqued throughout the viewing of this film and because of the logical and accessible format, this documentary can be used effectively as educational material for learners of all ages. The most overpowering feeling after viewing the film is awe: Siaka Diaboute is an incredible musician and Zemp's documentary certainly does his skill justice.

### **An African Brass Band**

Hugo Zemp's film about brass bands in Jacquville, near Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire won the prize for the most innovative film at the Sardinia International Ethnographic Film Festival in Nuoro, Italy, in 2006. This documentary follows a sacred brass band that has evolved from a Western influenced sound into a uniquely Côte d'Ivoirian one.

Based on commentary from members of the Jacquville Brass Band, the film looks at the development of brass bands in the area and documents different events where the band performs. This band is not a formal military band but rather a "dance brass band" that is used to accompany various religious occasions. Zemp uses the banter of the band members and a musicologist, Paul Dagri, whom he records sitting around at a formal meeting place, to introduce the differently themed chapters which include: Mass of Assumption, The Musicians, Funerals, Departure for Fishing, Free-ball, Mapuka and Combining Brass Bands and Traditional Drums.

The history of the brass bands in the area is fascinating. According to Paul Dagri, along the Aladian Coast there were a multitude of divinities, including Goli and Gbegre, who were adored by the people through musical performance on traditional instruments.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These include cow-bells and *atekpre* drums.

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This was frowned upon by the Catholic priests at the time who wanted music to be traditionally European and forbade any performances on African instruments. Converts to Christianity therefore abandoned the practice but yearned for another form of musical entertainment. Europeans in Grand Bassam, the first capital of colonial Côte d'Ivoire (1893–1899) were being amused by brass bands which became popular in other areas such as Sakasso, where the first non-European brass band was formed. Other towns followed suit and in 1927 Jacquerville created their own brass band, but performed secular music rather than the sacred style of music which is currently played.

This account of the development of the brass bands was news to the current band members who speak freely about their experiences and life stories in the film. The performers speak of their introduction to the various instruments such as the trumpet, trombone, tuba or horn and explain how they learn music mainly through tonic solfa notation which is widely used throughout Africa. It is also obvious from the various religious ceremonies that were recorded that the performers, although unorthodox in the manner in which they play and hold their instruments, are very capable of transposing and learning music by ear. The film also introduces interesting dance forms such as free-ball about which not very much is known<sup>4</sup> but involves a soccer ball and mapouka, a performance style mainly concerned with the “shaking of bottoms”.

The culmination of the film is as a result of Zemp's suggestion that the Jacquerville Brass Band make music with traditional *atekpre* drums as an accompaniment. They do just this and the result is very pleasing to a Western ear. However, certain members of the band disagree and Zemp allows their candid responses to be filmed. Although not as well formatted as the Zemp's *Siaka, an African Musician*, this film works because of the lively debate between the musicians in which their different opinions are expressed. But, it is not suitable as an educational resource for school-age learners; I would suggest that it is more suited to the needs of ethnomusicologists and useful for university-level courses.

Boudina McConnachie, ILAM, Rhodes University

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond that it originated from Ghana.