

DVD REVIEW

MASTERS OF THE BALAFON, 2001, 2002. by Hugo Zemp. Colour, DVD Series. Produced by Sélénium Films, distributed by Educational Resources (www.der.org).

There are four DVDs in this series, made by the veteran maker of ethnographic films, Hugo Zemp. They are:

Funeral Festivities, 2001, 80 minutes

Friends Well Come! 2002, 27 minutes

The Joy of Youth, 2002, 70 minutes

The Wood and the Calabash, 2002, 47 minutes

For those unfamiliar with the music of the Senufo of Côte d'Ivoire, the four films¹ offer an introduction to this little known xylophone tradition. Viewers would be well advised to start by watching *Funeral Festivities* as it is the film that gives the most direct musical and ethnographic information. Some of the musical organization is explained, for example the role of the solo/lead balafon and that of the two accompanying xylophones and the drummers who form the basic ensemble. The viewer will gain insight into the close relationship between the compositions and the tonal language which dictates melodic contour and rhythmic inflection. Lengthy footage of the different funeral rituals gives a broad background to the other three DVDs.

Zemp states in a text box on the screen (one of the techniques used to give factual information in all four films) in *Friend Well Come!* that the motivation of this film was to recreate for viewers the same overwhelming emotions that he experienced when he first heard it. Perhaps for this reason, much of the film is without explanation of any kind. The viewer is immersed in the sounds and sights of the funeral festivities, the separate groups of balafon players moving around the deceased (thickly shrouded in many layers of cloth) and playing completely independently of each other, resulting in the dense textures that bring joy to the mourners. This DVD has four extra features, 'Senufo Balafons from Burkina Faso', 'Siaka Plays the Maninka Balafon', 'Xylophones Without Resonators' and 'Music Class in Abidjan'.

Joy of Youth uses the same extended scenes as the other films in the series, starting with a hoeing competition and the accompanying music that spurs on the workers and energises them to keep working. Other contexts within Senufo life in which balafon music is central are also covered in the film, including a Catholic service, the *poro* initiatory society and secular dance parties for the youth. The technique that Zemp uses to illuminate this musical tradition is the same for this film as for the others: Senufo

¹ Zemp's films, "Siaka, an African Musician", and "An African Brass Band" reviewed in *African Music* V 9, n 2 (2008) are also distributed by Educational Resources (www.der.org).

musician Sikaman Soro interviews various musicians and participants and both his questions and the explanations he receives are rooted in local knowledge and ways of thinking about music. Children learn to play the balafon by starting on unresonated xylophones that they play in the fields to chase away the monkeys. This film emphasizes that the Balafon is so central to the life of the community that there is no threat of it being discarded by the youth; it not only gives them a voice, but brings joy.

The focus of *The Wood and the Calabash* is on the making of a balafon, from the sacrifice and prayers to the genies at the felling of the tree, to the completion of the instrument. This beautiful film not only shows the intricacy of the task involved in finding materials and fashioning the different parts of the instrument with a few basic tools, but reveals the skill, knowledge and passion of the instrument maker who systematically applies himself to his task. Tuning the keys, preparing resonators, and making the rubber strips that will bind the expertly made mallets are all treated in detail. Scenes of village life are highly evocative and the film seems to move at the same gentle pace as that of the villagers.

The four films give a broad account of the importance of the balafon to the Senufo. The film maker seeks to present the music as performed and understood by the people themselves, and thus it is their voice rather than his own that is most apparent. The lack of analysis and information can be frustrating, especially as the ethnomusicologist viewer is keen to ask 'Why?' 'What?' 'When?' at every turn, but the story of the balafon told in the words of Senufo participants is a story of sound, community and integration with daily life which says far more than ethnographic and musicological analysis can ever say.

Mandy Carver