EXAMINING THE SUCCESS OF MALIAN MUSIC AS WORLD MUSIC

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Abstract: Malian music is ubiquitous in world music. Indeed, Malian artists consistently appear more often and rank higher in world music record charts than artists of any other nationality. While the concept and industry of world music and the histories and workings of Malian music have been examined at length in the past, scholarship on the intersection of the two has been sparse. This article investigates how various marketing techniques and narrative tropes have been used to secure Mali's on-going presence within world music. Tuareg *essouf* band Tinariwen is introduced as a specific case study to allow exploration into themes of audience familiarity and unfamiliarity; the use of wider narratives to promote music; and the role of cultural brokers in this process. Malian music can be considered ideal for the world music markets, with musical, narrative and political forces aligning in an optimal manner to facilitate the most effective strategies of marketing towards world music audiences. By studying the dominance of Malian music in world music, we can examine more clearly the mechanics of the industry, but also the attitudes and behaviours of the world music audience and the artistic, industrial and even institutional practices and processes that define world music as a whole.[1]

Keywords: audiences, Mali, marketing, music industry, Tinariwen, Tuareg, world music

The World Music Charts Europe (WMCE) are perhaps the best measure of critical success in the European world music scene.[2] The charts, compiled monthly and annually, rank albums based on choices by a panel of specialist world music radio DJs in Europe. As of writing, the panel consists of 42 DJs from 24 countries (Brandellero and Pfeffer 2011, 496–497; World Music Charts Europe 2021a). Comparing the charts over time helps one to determine fluctuations of the relative successes of various musics. Below, I have parsed the charts into statistics tables based on two different time-frames, to better visualise both short-term and long-term trends.

[1] An early version of this article was first written as a submission for the course, "Music in Africa: Critical Listening," at SOAS, University of London, in 2018, and later presented as a paper at the British Forum for Ethnomusicology Annual Conference in Aberdeen, 14 April 2019. Thanks to Angela Impey and Lucy Durán for helping me develop this article for publication.

[2] I use the highly contested term, "world music," in the fashion common in contemporary ethnomusicology: that is, music of often non-Western origins marketed in the style of popular music specifically to those in the West, often with some allusion to the music as "different" or "exotic" in comparison to the standard popular or art music of the West (Taylor 2015, 88–90). Initially invented as a marketing tool, world music—as used in this article—remains primarily defined by its style of marketing. For a succinct contemporary history of the invention of world music marketing, see Anderson (2000).

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Both tables show the representation of countries in the charts, based on the frequency and placing of albums by artists representing those countries. Figure 1 shows data from the monthly charts for the past year.[3] Data was collected from the top twenty albums of each month as only these are routinely published in the WMCE. Points were assigned based on an album's position in the charts, from twenty points given to the albums at number one, to one point given to the albums at number twenty. If an album was credited to more than one country, both received the full number of points (for example, when Tony Allen and Hugh Masekela's album was at number ten in the charts, both Nigeria and South Africa were given eleven points). If a country was represented by more than one artist in the top twenty, the points were tallied. In this scale, the more points a country has, the higher and more often its artists had placed in the chart for that month. For clarity, only countries with the twenty highest tallies are shown.

Various short-scale trends can be seen in Figure 1. For example, where one album has achieved success for a specific country, a sharp rise in popularity can be seen, followed by a slow tailing-off period over several months. This can be seen particularly in the Polish and Dutch entries. Longer-term trends can be seen where some countries have fluctuating success, sometimes with multiple chart entries at a time, as can be seen in the Spanish and Czech entries.

Figure 2 was created using a similar method, but instead using the WMCE's overall annual charts since their inception in 1991, and only taking the top ten albums of each year. Again, points were assigned based on an album's position in the annual charts: albums at number one received ten points and albums at number ten received one point. Only countries with the twenty highest tallies are shown.

This table is particularly useful for charting wider trends in world music taste in Europe across time. For example, Algerian music was particularly popular in the 1990s but declined thereafter, whereas Sahrawi music has come to particular prominence since the 2010s.

In viewing the WMCE since its inception, a particular statistic leaps out: in both the latest twelve monthly charts and the 1991–2020 annual charts, Mali sits at the top of the tables; in fact, it tops the annual charts with more than twice the number of points as Senegal, the country in second place.[4] This means, in both the recent short-term and over the past 30 years, albums by Malian artists have been placed more often and in higher positions than those of any other country. The dominance of Malian music among the WMCE is clear.

To anyone with any experience of world music, such dominance is likely unsurprising. It is merely a confirmation of the obvious: that Malian music is ubiquitous within world music. Mali has produced more world music stars than anywhere else in Africa, and,

[3] Figure 1 uses the charts published in the twelve months immediately preceding the submission of this article to peer review.

[4] It should be noted that in 2003, the only year that there was not an album by a Malian artist in the top ten of the annual chart, Malian artists occupied both eleventh and twelfth positions.

Position	Country	Total Points	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21	Sep 21
1	Mali	211	17	17	9	8		4	11	55	47	26	17	
2	Belgium	160	22	32	21	16	28	24	17					
3	Italy	156				7	25	14			18	35	33	24
4	Finland	124	16		13	9	8	12	22		1	18	15	10
5	France	123				12	12					40	35	24
6	Spain	94		22	22	20			13	1	11		5	
7	Czechia	92	1	10		17	19	25	15	2		3		
8	Greece	87			14		18	21	18	9				7
9	Poland	86						20	20	18	16	12		
10	Israel	85				20	20	12				14	16	3
11	Colombia	79			20	19	10	13	15	2				
12	Cyprus	77								4	20	20	18	15
=13	Norway	73	20	20	11	14	5					3		
=13	Hungary	73				12	26	24						11
15	Brazil	72	7	1	15	21	20			8				
16	Netherlands	61						13	19	17	12			
17	Algeria	59										15	12	32
18	Benin	58			18	18	7					8	7	
19	Bos&Herz	57	32	18	7									
=20	Iran	55	20	20	11			4						
=20	India	55	18	19	12									6

Figure 1: Nations represented in the monthly World Music Charts Europe, October 2020 to September 2021.
Data from World Music Charts Europe (2021b).

Position	Country	Points total	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
1	Mali	426	17	3	17	10	11	25	1	13	15	8	8	17		14	19	12	23	27	19	18	18	18	17	9	10	7	15	28	20	7
2	Senegal	159	10	18	10	9				18	8	6	5	10	7	15	5	5	3		2	4					7		9	8		
3	USA	133		5	7	14			9	8	4				8	1	4	13		2			17	8	1	1	2	3	10	6	10	
4	Algeria	87		8	4	16		4	10	7		17	1	5				3			3				9							
5	UK	84	1				7		9		6	4	4		15						15		2		1		3			8		9
6	Spain	77								6			12	2	1						1		6	9		14		10	5			11
7	Cuba	76				2		2	18	3	10	2	7		18		2		1			3						3	5			
8	DR Congo	68		4		6	6							3				4			9			10	2	6	6	6	6			
9	France	65							1	7			11			6		1	7	5	3	15				9						
10	Brazil	49					4					3				3	3						5	4			5	9	3		10	
=11	Western Sahara	44																				7		9		10		10	7			1
=11	Finland	44	2		8				3													5	8	3				5	8			2
13	Romania	41	4							7			6				6		5				3				10					
14	Madagascar	36		5		1			8				3							10										9		
15	Canada	35						3								11		9		9					3							
16	Morocco	33			5															10		9								9		
17	Cape Verde	31		6			10		6		5				2													2				
18	Turkey	28														2		9		9									2	6		
=19	Belize	26																	10	8					8							
=19	Hungary	26						9																	6	8					3	

Figure 2: Nations represented in the annual World Music Charts Europe, 1991 to 2020.
Data from Gift Music GmbH (2012) and World Music Charts Europe (2021b).

whether as a cause or a consequence, it also has the most artists in the continent signed to European or US-based record labels (Eyre 2005, 151; Schulz 2016, 771).

Both the concept and industry of world music and the histories, workings and culture of Malian music have been examined at length; however, at this point, scholarship on the intersection of the two has been sparse.[5] If Malian music is so demonstrably popular across the world music scene, what about the music or its marketing has led to such dominance among audiences, and how has that been sustained for so long? By studying the dominance of Malian music in world music, one can examine the mechanics of the industry more seriously, in addition to the attitudes and behaviours of the world music audience and the artistic, industrial and even institutional practices and processes that define world music as a whole.

I am approaching this topic from my position as a white British person who has worked in different roles within the European world music industry in the UK and Germany since 2012, including in the journalism and events management sectors. My research and analysis take into consideration observations of the industry and its workings that I have made during this time. This article explores Malian music's place in and as world music and posits possible theories to explain its success in this field. I will examine this success through the lenses of three different marketing techniques and how each allows Malian music to prosper. They are: audience familiarity and unfamiliarity; the use of wider narratives to promote music; and the role of cultural brokers. Due to their nature (and that of music marketing) all three of these techniques are linked and frequently intersect. Finally, these themes will be illustrated in a case study of the career of the Tuareg *essouf* band, Tinariwen.

Audience familiarity and unfamiliarity

A factor that has consistently marked success in world music is perceived authenticity. The more "authentic" that a world music audience perceives an artist to be, the more popularity that artist is likely to enjoy (Taylor 2015, 90). What is meant by authenticity in this context is somewhat hard to define for audiences themselves, and these definitions

[5] Malian music has been explored from many different angles. Durán (1995; 2000; 2007; 2013) has published extensively on Malian music, particularly in regards to women's music, a topic also covered by Maxwell (2008). Various Malian musical and cultural expressions are discussed in, for example, Couloubaly and Bjornson (1993), Polak (2012) and Coulibaly and Frank (2015), among many others. The cosmopolitan nature of music in Mali, especially Bamako, is discussed Skinner (2008) and Schulz (2012). Morgan (2013) writes on intersections of conflict and politics with Malian music. Discussions of Malian music in relation to the wider Mande cultural sphere can be found in Charry (2000) and Councel (2006). The workings, history and ethics of world music have also been explored extensively. Famous early discussions include those by Feld (1996), Zemp (1996) and Erlmann (1996). Taylor (1998; 2015), Kassabian (2006) and Howard (2009) have looked at the field through the lens of commerce and capitalism. The recent state of the world music industry is discussed in Whitmore (2016), Brandellero and Pfeffer (2011) and Hattersley (2004). Audience perceptions of world music are discussed in Weiss (2014) and Haynes (2005). The adaptation of particular musical cultures into world music is discussed in Turino (1998; 2003) regarding Zimbabwe and Shannon (2003) regarding Syria. These examples only represent a fraction of the total scholarship among the two fields of Malian music and world music.

are often markedly different from those of the artists; this is the difference between the Western perception of authenticity and the artists' lived experiences of authenticity (Whitmore 2016, 330–1). In discussing potential sources of a world music audience's perceived authenticity, Taylor (2015, 105–6) specifically refers to the capital of lineage, including shared geography: "If a musician comes from a region famous for music, or famous for producing musicians, or famous for a particularly revered regional style [...], all these can be constructed as forms of capital."

That two of world music's most significant, earliest stars—Salif Keita and Ali Farka Touré—were Malian gave other Malian artists access to this capital of lineage, thereby paving the way for more world music stars. As more stars (Oumou Sangaré, Toumani Diabaté, Habib Koite) were made with the help of these successes, their label as "Malian" functioned similarly to a brand, and thus it could command brand recognition and even brand loyalty. Audiences that enjoyed the music of these artists could be assured that any other music from Mali would likely also be to their tastes. As Western promoters and record labels aimed to capitalise on this brand recognition and loyalty and find the "next big thing" from Mali, the number of Malian artists holding contracts in the West grew to the levels that still hold strong today. This can be seen on a smaller but more demonstrable scale using the WMCE: in Figure 2, above, a clear boom in Cuban music can be seen in 1997 and the years following; this coincides with the release of the immensely popular album (and accompanying documentary), *Buena Vista Social Club*, in 1997. The strength of the Cuban music "brand" that arose from the success of the Buena Vista Social Club album allowed Cuban musicians to continue to place highly on the chart for a number of years.

However, while a Malian artist's nationality can provide them with authenticity capital, another crucial element of world music success must be considered: that of difference. World music audiences are often noted to gravitate towards music that sounds new and exciting to them, while never straying too far out of their range of familiarity (Whitmore 2016, 340). Here, again, Mali prospers: the country is home to many socio-linguistic groups and sub-groups, each of which has its own, often distinctive, musical culture; many groups also have societal strata and hereditary professions (such as griots, blacksmiths and hunters) that have their own styles of music associated with them (Eyre 2005, 151). All of these, together with many inter-group pop styles, make up an extremely diverse range of musical sounds that can satisfy a world music audience's endless hunger for the new and different. When world music fans feel like they "know" one type of Malian music, they can still experience the excitement of "discovering" many others without too much stylistic overlap.

In this way, Malian music can fulfil two of the world music audience's most crucial, yet usually opposing desires: the audience has been conditioned to regard Malian music as at once familiar (due to their trust in the Mali "brand") and unfamiliar (as Malian music always seems to have a "new" sound waiting to be "discovered").

The use of narrative

Narrative is arguably important within the marketing of any music, but particularly so in world music (Whitmore 2016, 338–40). Narratives constructed around music and musicians in world music discourses often have similar themes. When these themes match up to common world music tropes, as those around Malian music often do, their popularity within world music benefits (ibid.). The following are three of the most common narratives used in world music that can be applied to Malian music.

It is very common for music from Mali to be theorised as "the roots of the blues" (cf. Casebeer 2012). This theory contends that when people of what is now Mali were brought to the Americas in slavery, they brought their musical traditions with them, and, over centuries of evolution and repression, transformed them into what we now know as blues music (Durán 2013, 216). Such theories have been studied by ethnomusicologists, notably Kubik (1999) and Durán (2013), who focus on specific musical elements of particular social groups. However, in the popular discourse of world music, this narrative has been widely developed based on mere speculation: the "blues" label has been attached to Malian musicians of very disparate styles with little to no specific historical or musicological evidence to link them to the American style (Durán 2013, 211). The connection has become so popular that there have been many blues-based collaborations between Malian and Western musicians (as is discussed below), and the marketing potential of the narrative is so strong that a band playing a mixture of rock and funk in a Songhai idiom are given the somewhat inappropriate name of Songhoy Blues (Morgan 2015, 31). The narrative of Malian music as the roots of the blues plays into a common and problematic trope of Africans representing a primal and untouched past upon which Western civility is built (Taylor 2015, 91). By referring to Malian music in this way, it promotes the idea of linear cultural development; that the music in Mali became the blues, which in turn became rock music. By ignoring the concurrent development of musical styles, this implies that Malian music, and thus culture, exists in a less advanced state than the music of Western culture.

The "roots of the blues" narrative also plays on many of the same tropes as another pervasive theme in the discourse of world music: the narrative of historicity. The idea that today's music is drawn from an ancient, unbroken tradition is key to many discussions of Malian music. This can most clearly be seen in relation to the music of the griots—in their status as privileged and often virtuoso musicians, that this status is hereditary and that most griots can trace their family line back many centuries all make them a perfect encapsulation of Taylor's capital of lineage (Charry 2000, 90–4; Taylor 2015, 105). This narrative is easily applied to musicians performing traditional (or, importantly, traditional-sounding) styles of music, but can also be applied to pop musicians, who are said to reinterpret, reinvent or even consciously reject the culture of the ancients (Morgan 2014, 30–1). Their connection to that ancient culture is made nevertheless. It is easy to see how this narrative can play on the trope of African musicians as primal, primitive and connected to the earth, when all musicians can be readily connected to music created a thousand years ago or more, regardless of their own musical styles (Taylor 2015, 91).

A final narrative illustrated here has been used with increasing frequency in the past nine years. In 2012, Mali, which had previously enjoyed a relatively long period of peace and stability, experienced conflict after Tuaregs in the north of the country declared independence from the rest of the country (Morgan 2013, 13–22). The subsequent chain of events, including the involvement of al-Qaeda groups, led to war in various parts of Mali that continues to this day (ibid.). These events have led to a "war and peace" narrative in relation to Mali within both the world music press and the mainstream media. The war resulted in a large amount of news coverage in the West, leading to lots of exposure of Malian issues among those to whom they otherwise would have remained obscure. A country or culture that is largely unknown to a Western audience being heavily featured in the media, especially the news, whether for positive or negative reasons, naturally broadens the audience's exposure to that culture, leading to an increased interest in that culture's arts (Swedenburg 2004, 182).

At times, during this period of war, music has been banned in certain locations and musicians persecuted (Morgan 2013, 23). When music is banned, the very act of making music itself is politicised and can be seen as an act of resistance. This has allowed international commentators to refer to any Malian music as promoting peace or, at the very least, resisting war. The "war and peace" narrative as used within the discourse of world music focuses on the risks musicians take to bring their music to the (Western) audience and the use of music as anti-war, pro-peace protest (ibid., 77). As mentioned by Swedenburg (2004, 182), "many capitalist firms have successfully promoted the sensibility that consumption can be a form of progressive political practice"; in the same way, world music audiences can increase their own progressive political cachet simply by listening to Malian music and absorbing the musicians' resistance by proxy. Much like the rise in popularity of Arabic music observed since the attacks of September 11 2001, Malian music has seen a noticeable boost in international attention since the outbreak of war (Morgan 2013, 77; Swedenburg 2004, 182).

The above examples are only three narrative tropes that are used in the marketing and promotion of Malian music to prospective Western listeners as part of the world music sphere, and they all, to some degree, play up to perceived familiarity and unfamiliarity between Malian culture and Western culture. There are, of course, many more narratives pertaining to Malian music in common use, all of which can serve to entice those who have not yet been exposed to Malian music to try it, as long as they are sufficiently intrigued by one or more narratives.

The role of cultural brokers

A third factor contributing to the popularity of Malian music as world music, and related to the two already discussed, is an abundance of cultural brokers. This term refers to Westerners who act as a "gateway" between their own audience and non-Western musicians; cultural brokers are often musicians who take part in cross-cultural collaboration, but they can also be producers, remixers or even famous and vocal fans (Taylor 2015, 97). There are many examples of cultural brokerage in relation to Malian music; some of the most notable and commercially successful relationships include Ry Cooder with Ali Farka Touré; Manu Chao with Amadou & Mariam; the Kronos Quartet with Trio Da Kali; and Damon Albarn with many Malian artists by way of his *Mali Music* and Africa Express projects.

The work of the cultural broker can be related to the concept of brand. By working with a Malian artist, a Western star employs their audience's own brand loyalty to promote that artist while adding to their own cachet of authenticity: "Fans are invited to use the Western stars' tastes to follow them to new music" (ibid.). Such collaboration is no doubt effective; many of the most prominent Malian artists on the world music scene have increased their international listenership and even produced their most critically-acclaimed work in this way (Williamson *et al.* 2013, 27–35).

A style of cultural brokerage that is particularly common in Malian music comes in the form of collaborations between Malian artists and notable blues musicians such as Ry Cooder, Taj Mahal, Corey Harris, Robert Plant and Justin Adams. In world music discourse, these collaborations are invariably linked directly with the "roots of the blues" narrative discussed above. They are framed as meetings across history and a focus is often placed on the ease at which the collaboration took place. The collaboration is often seen as unencumbered by cultural difference because, in this narrative, Malian music and the blues *are* the same culture (Obrecht 2011).

When Malian artists—or any other artists within the world music scene—are marketed with the help of cultural brokers, this plays into the factor of familiarity and unfamiliarity as discussed above. When the brokerage takes the form of a musical collaboration, listeners who are acquainted with the work of the Western artist can be assured that the resulting recordings or performances will contain elements that are both comfortably familiar (due to the participation of that Western artist) and excitingly unfamiliar (due to the participation of the Malian musician, who may be new to them) at the same time.

Discounting issues of the occasionally dubious equality of terms upon which such collaborations are conducted, cultural brokerage is frequently interpreted within popular world music discourse in a problematic manner. When discussing such collaboration, promotional material and press often employ neo-colonialist tropes of discovery (the Western artist is credited with "discovering" the Malian artist) and neo-liberal tropes of universalism (that all cultures are essentially similar, that "music is a universal language") (Obrecht 2011; Taylor 2015, 99–100, 103). That the Malian artist may have already had a successful career and dedicated fan-base before meeting their Western collaborator, or that the collaboration may have been impossible without an entourage of translators and minders, is downplayed—these facts would make for a less interesting and less marketable narrative than the common, if problematic, tropes.

The marketing techniques discussed above—audience familiarity and unfamiliarity; the use of narrative; the role of cultural brokers—are all related and used in varying degrees and combinations to promote Malian music to audiences in the West as world music. Next, I look more closely at these techniques in action using a case-study of the band Tinariwen.

Case study: Tinariwen

The Tuareg, or Kel Tamasheq, are a semi-nomadic Berber people whose land stretches across the modern-day national borders of Mali, Algeria, Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria (see Figure 3) (Rasmussen 2005, 798; Smithsonian 2007). A minority population group in all five countries, the Tuareg generally have tense relations with national governments; their forces have been at war with the governments of both Mali and Niger intermittently since the 1990s (Rasmussen 2005, 794–8). As such, theirs is an ambivalent and problematic relationship with notions of nationality (Straker 2008, 86).

The most internationally famous Tuareg musicians are the band Tinariwen. The group's core members are originally from the region of Kidal in Mali, but the band came together in the 1970s in the refugee camps of Tamanrasset, Algeria and Muammar

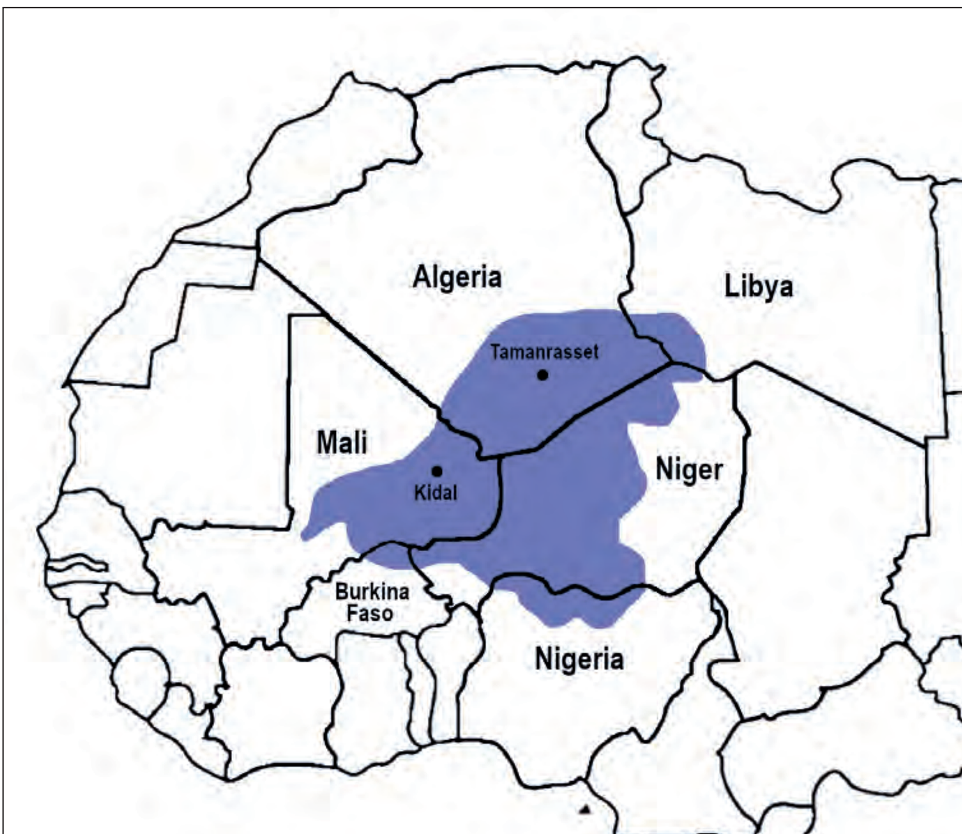

Figure 3: An approximate outline of the historic Tuareg region, in blue, within West Africa with modern political boundaries marked. Data from Smithsonian (2007). Map by Author.

Gaddafi's military camps in Libya (Morgan 2005, 29–30). They perform a style of music known variously as *essouf*, *tishoumaren* or simply "guitar," which is based on urban *tinde* and *takamba* music, with influences from rock, reggae and *raï* music (Rasmussen 2008, 618; Justin Adams, pers. comm. April 2018). As its name suggests, this style is guitar-based, and Tinariwen's line-up usually consists of around five guitars (electric, acoustic and bass), a chorus (usually two members who provide backing vocals and hand-claps; the rest of the band also sings) and a percussionist (most often playing the *djembe*). They are considered the originators of *essouf* and were popular among Tuareg audiences for two decades before their first international release in 2001 (Justin Adams, pers. comm. April 2018). Their subsequent two albums, *Amassakoul* (from 2004) and *Aman Iman* (from 2007), secured their status as world music stars. They later won a Grammy award for Best World Music Album for *Tassili*, released in 2011 (Grammy 2021). Each of the three themes discussed above in relation to Malian music can be observed in Tinariwen's world music career.

Despite the band's transnational presence, they are frequently labelled in world music discourse as Malian (Meadley 2004, 22). While the members of the band consider the city of Kidal their home, such national labels can be problematic for Tuaregs. For example, this can be seen in relation to the Tuareg musical group Tartit, who, even when explicitly representing Mali on the international stage, bristled at being presented as Malians, preferring the adjective, "nomads" (Straker 2008, 85–6). Nevertheless, such a national label arguably helped to bring about Tinariwen's success, linking them with the Mali "brand" and its many world music stars. It is obvious that Tinariwen themselves had a similar effect of creating a strand of cultural lineage within the Western music-buying consciousness. As the first Tuareg guitar band to gain international recognition (and huge success in the process), they could be considered to have started a Tuareg "brand" (Justin Adams, pers. comm, April 2018). Since Tinariwen's rise to stardom, there has been an exponential proliferation of Tuareg and *essouf* bands operating on the international world music scene.

One of the ways that this proliferation can be best illustrated is by examining *Songlines Magazine*'s "Top of the World" albums. *Songlines Magazine* is a leading English-language world music magazine, with the highest circulation among world music magazines in the UK (and possibly the world). The "Top of the World" designation indicates the ten albums that the magazine considers the best of the current issue; tracks from each are included in the magazine's covermount CD (InPublishing 2015). The following is a chronological list of albums by Tuareg musicians and bands that have been selected as "Top of the World" in *Songlines Magazine* since it was first published in 1999 until January 2019, along with the issue in which they appeared[6]:

- Tinariwen – *Amassakoul* (Issue 23, 2004)
- Etran Finatawa[7] – *Introducing Etran Finatawa* (Issue 38, 2006)

[6] I held an editorial position with the magazine between January 2019 and January 2020; data from during and after this time has been disregarded as a possible conflict of interest.

[7] Etran Finatawa are a mixed group of Tuareg and Wodaabe musicians.

- Tartit[8] – *Abacabok* (Issue 40, 2006)
- Tinariwen – *Aman Iman* (Issue 42, 2007)
- Etran Finatawa – *Desert Crossroads* (Issue 52, 2008)
- Tinariwen – *Imidiwan* (Issue 62, 2009)
- Tamikrest – *Adagh* (Issue 67, 2010)
- Terakaft – *Aratan n Azawad* (Issue 76, 2011)
- Bombino – *Agadez* (Issue 77, 2011)
- Tamikrest – *Toumastin* (Issue 78, 2011)
- Bombino – *Nomad* (Issue 92, 2013)
- Etran Finatawa – *The Sahara Sessions* (Issue 93, 2013)
- Tamikrest – *Chatma* (Issue 96, 2013)
- Faris – *Mississippi to Sahara* (Issue 111, 2015)
- Sainkho Namtchylak, Eyadou Ag Leche, Said Ag Ayad[9] – *Like a Bird or Spirit, Not a Face* (Issue 116, 2016)
- Imarhan – *Imarhan* (Issue 118, 2016)
- Kel Assouf – *Tikounen* (Issue 119, 2016)
- Tinariwen – *Elwan* (Issue 125, 2017)
- Tamikrest – *Kidal* (Issue 127, 2017)
- Les Filles De Illighadad – *Eghass Malan* (Issue 137, 2017)

While this list is by no means a scientific method for showing the number of Tuareg artists currently operating on the international scene, or even their commercial success, it at least shows which groups have received some of the highest exposure in the British world music press. Most importantly, it is useful to note that of the 20 albums of Tuareg music designated as "Top of the World," all came after Tinariwen's first big hit, *Amassakoul*, in 2004, suggesting that the band, and this album in particular, opened the doors for Tuareg bands in the UK.

Tinariwen's story and music also fit easily into established world music narratives. Connections to blues music are inescapable; the "roots of the blues" label has been widely attached to Tuareg guitar musicians despite no particular historical evidence for such claims (Rosen 2007). "War and peace" is also a particularly strong narrative for Tinariwen. Their music is seen in world music discourse as a force for peace despite the band being personally caught up in numerous conflicts as both soldiers and civilians—a perfect example being a 2017 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* headlined, "Tinariwen brings message of peace from African desert" (Mervis 2017). A closer inspection of the group's songs, however, perhaps complicates this assumption, as their lyrics (in the Tamasheq language) can be interpreted as a very literal call-to-arms (Belalimat 2010, 161–3; Romig 2012). That Tinariwen are the originators of their specific genre is also a powerful narrative (Morgan 2005, 30).

8 The only non-guitar based group on this list.

9 This album is a collaboration between Siberian vocalist Sainkho Namtchylak and Tuareg musicians Eyadou Ag Leche and Said Ag Ayad.

Tinariwen's international career has utilised a number of cultural brokers. They were first brought to the attention of the world music scene through collaborations with Lo'Jo and Justin Adams (both artists with a strong world music cachet) and then on to popular music markets through collaborations with Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, Carlos Santana and Red Hot Chili Peppers, as well as in attracting notable fans such as Thom Yorke of Radiohead and Brian Eno. These connections are still frequently mentioned in the press regarding Tinariwen, despite the band's subsequent fame in their own right (Lewis 2009; Morgan 2005, 32).

It can be seen that, despite the historically problematic relationship between the Tuareg and national identities—and especially that of Mali—the success of Tinariwen within the world music scene can at least in part be attributed to the way the band's music has been marketed as Malian. This has been achieved explicitly, by referring to the band as Malian, and implicitly, by utilising many of the same marketing techniques, tropes and narratives as are often used in the promotion of Malian music as world music. In this way, the band benefits from its connection to the "brand" of Malian music, while retaining a social and musical identity that transcends national identity.

Conclusion

Above I have discussed three possible reasons as to why Mali holds such an indisputably dominant place in world music: audience familiarity and unfamiliarity, the use of narratives, and the role of cultural brokers. Although I believe that each of these issues are found more abundantly in discourses surrounding Malian music in the world music scene than perhaps that of any other country, this only scratches the surface. There are many other reasons that are sure to have an influence on Mali's success within world music markets. National and international cultural policies, the position of music in everyday life, musical pedagogy within Mali leading to high levels of virtuosity, and the musicological and organological palatability of Malian music to Western ears (and concerted efforts ensure this palatability) doubtless all play their parts. More general world music issues such as tropes of exoticism, romantic orientalism and world music as a cultural signifier also have real impact (see Kassabian (2004) and Howard (2009)).

My argument has been presented from the perspective of a professional in various aspects of the world music industry in Europe, including journalism and events management. The perspective of Malian researchers working in the production of music for a (Western) world music audience will provide further valuable insights regarding the uneven perception of the music among different audiences and how the production of such music is affected by the audiences it reaches (or aims to reach), besides the local.

It should be clear that there is no single reason that can explain Malian music's position as a dominant force in world music. In fact, it is likely that all of these reasons are important. When taken into account simultaneously, they all add up to a perfect combination. The unique interweaving of histories, narratives and cross-cultural musical aesthetics amounts to an optimal alignment that facilitates the most effective strategies of world music marketing. In this way, one can begin to understand why world music audiences in the West and beyond gravitate so forcefully to the music of Mali. Judging by the fact Malian music enjoyed the most successful year in the history of the World Music Charts Europe as recently as 2018, its popularity shows no signs of slowing.

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