

## SUITE FOR BURKINA ELECTRIC AND ORCHESTRA

*Suite for Burkina Electric and Orchestra* was commissioned by the MDR (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk – Central German Broadcasting Company) and conductor Kristjan Järvi for the MDR Symphony Orchestra to perform together with Burkina Electric, my Burkina Faso-based electronic pop band. It was composed in spring 2016 and premiered on June 16, 2016 at Werk 2 in Leipzig, Germany. Consisting of 4 movements, the duration of the work is 40-45 minutes, to which I may add further movements in the future.

I felt this project to be quite challenging owing to the crucial differences between the two ensembles collaborating in the performance. Burkina Electric uses electronics, electric guitar, and drum set; the group has a lead singer and two choreographers/dancers who also sing. This is a sound world, and an approach to performance, that couldn't differ more sharply from a symphony orchestra. More daunting yet are the very different ways in which these groups learn and interpret their music. The orchestra works with fully notated scores and a conductor. Burkina Electric employs a fairly complex Ableton Live set on a laptop that provides some of the basic musical material which we modify and reshape fluidly in concert by improvising based on a cueing system we have evolved over years of communication and collaboration. Myself aside, none of the members of Burkina Electric read music or ever followed a conductor, and we compose our songs collaboratively and learn them by rote. To make things worse, the (unionized) MDR orchestra was not able to adapt to our rehearsal needs; we had one rehearsal of 90 minutes plus the dress rehearsal to prepare 40+ minutes of music for performance. The videos are of the premiere, the result of this quick rehearsal process.

The major challenge, therefore, was how to coordinate the two groups. I composed music that would allow for slight shifts between the groups; if someone came in early or late, the consequences wouldn't be too dire. This is accomplished in different ways in each movement. *Haïdara* contains numerous brief solo/group improvisation sections for Burkina Electric during which coordination, if lost, can be regained; the singer is free to sing in a variety of rhythms that line up differently with the instrumental music. *Ligdi* contains fermatas and sections where even the orchestra has some freedom to improvise as directed by the conductor. In *Gom Zanga*, the singer gives auditive cues to the conductor, while in *Mdole* the singer follows the orchestra's music.

Three of the four movements of the suite are recompositions of existing Burkina Electric songs. While based on the original song, they include new sections and much musical material that wasn't in the original version. All three of these extant pieces can be heard on Burkina Electric's CD *Paspanga*, which is included in this file. Since Burkina Electric is a collaborative group, a collaborative compositional process underlies this music; however, these recompositions were made by me alone. *Haïdara* is not based on a pre-existing song and was composed by me while Burkina Electric's singer Maï Lingani wrote the lyrics concurrently. The movements can be played in any order, but I am presenting them here in the sequence chosen by conductor Kristjan Järvi for the premiere (and, until now, only) performance. It was important for me not to create a piece of "orchestral pops" music; in keeping with Burkina Electric's mission as an experimentally-oriented dance band, I chose to use a wide range of techniques and timbres in the orchestra. It is my hope that the result is an organic combination of African pop and Western contemporary orchestral music, electronic and acoustic instruments, and perhaps forges some new ground in the combination of "classical" and "popular" musical elements.

*Haïdara*, with lyrics in French and an operatic/oratorio-like atmosphere, is in praise of Abdel Kader Haïdara, a librarian from Timbuktu who secretly evacuated ancient manuscripts from the city, saving them from destruction at the hands of militant Islamists. The full Burkina Electric band performs along with the orchestra. The orchestral part is designed to enhance drama and provide timbral contrast to the band's electronics and African-style electric guitar; band and orchestra are equal partners. The movement contains theatrical elements, with the dancers moving in silence, and one of them, Zoko Zoko, wresting control of the orchestra away from Kristjan Järvi.

*Mdolé*, a love song in Mooré, is scored for Maï Lingani, Burkina Electric's singer, as a soloist with the orchestra; the other band members do not perform. In its original version, this song makes wide use of samples of traditional instruments; these are imitated by the orchestra, taking the piece in new directions. The musical vocabulary is rooted in kora and balafon music of the Mandé cultures of western Burkina Faso and Mali, but seen through the lens of an orchestral composer.

The lyrics of *Ligdi* ("money" in Mooré) speak of the good and the evil that can be done with money. In its version for Burkina Electric alone, the song features extended improvised dance solos as well as sections where the band plays completely freely and out of time whilst an electronic beat continues in the background. These attributes are preserved here, and the orchestra reacts to cues given to them by the band (the full Burkina Electric group performs here along with the orchestra) that tell the conductor to move from one section to the next. A slow melody with a sweet, contemplative atmosphere opens and closes the piece and stands in stark contrast to the core song's more aggressive and noisy disposition.

*Gom Zanga*, with lyrics in a mixture of Mooré, words from languages ranging from English to Japanese, and gibberish, is Burkina Electric's habitual concert opener, welcoming the audience to the show. This recomposition is for orchestra and Burkina Electric's singers (lead and two background singers/dancers) and ends in a repeated riff that can be used for improvisation, or to seduce the audience to take the stage and dance. Synthesizers play a strong role in the original version of this song, and the orchestra is used to imitate synthesizers and effects such as filter sweeps and short delays, not only in reconstructing the music of the original song but also in new sections that are added at various points during the piece.

LL