

SOMM
RECORDINGS



African Pianism vol.2



Rebeca Omordia *piano*

This is the second volume of piano music by African-born composers played by Rebeca Omordia, the title of both discs coming from a set of pedagogical studies composed during the 1960s by the long-lived scion of 20th-century African concert music J.H. Kwabena Nketia. Nketia wrote:

“African Pianism refers to a style of piano music which derives its characteristic idiom from the procedures of African percussion music as exemplified in bell patterns, drumming, xylophone and mbira music. It may use simple or extended rhythmic motifs or the lyricism of traditional songs and even those of African popular music as the basis of its rhythmic phrases. It is open-ended as far as the use of tonal materials is concerned except that it may draw on the modal and cadential characteristics of traditional music.

“Its harmonic idiom may be tonal, consonant or dissonant in whole or in part, depending on the mood of the composer, the mood of impressions he wishes to create or how he chooses to reinforce, heighten or soften the jaggedness of successive percussive attacks. In this respect, the African composer does not have to tie himself down to any particular school of writing if his primary aim is to explore the potential of African rhythmic and tonal usages.”

The concept was further developed, as we shall hear, by Professor Akin Euba, who noted that African Pianism refers to the similarities between the piano as a Western instrument and certain traditional instruments, using the piano as a medium to express certain features of Nigerian traditional music.

Yet the wide range of solo piano music on this disc amply demonstrates that concert or recital music by composers of African ethnicity, whether white or black, reflects parts of traditional native African music that existed long before the 20th-century influence and later withdrawal of European governance.

Girma Yiflashewa was born in Addis Ababa in 1967, and his earliest musical interests led to him being accepted as a pupil at the Yared School of Music in the Ethiopian capital, from where he won a scholarship to the Sofia State Conservatory of Music in Bulgaria. His studies were interrupted for two years following the collapse of the Communist state in 1989, but he eventually graduated as a pianist and returned to East Africa in 1995. Yiflashewa has subsequently pursued a twin career as a concert pianist throughout Africa, the United States and Europe – notable for his performances of the music of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven – and also as a composer, particularly of solo piano music. In this collection, Rebeca Omordia plays Yiflashewa's *Elilta (Cry of Joy)*, composed in 2006, a self-evidently outward-looking piece of no little technical challenge, described as "a celebration of happiness" by the Swiss musicologist Louis Bernard.



Another contemporary leading composer of North African-Mediterranean art music is the Algerian musician **Salim Dada**, born in the regional capital of Laghouat in 1975. He studied composition with the French composer and academic Jean-Luc Kuczynski in Saintes, Charente-Maritime, and he also studied medicine at the Faculty of Medicine in Algiers. Dada has been a staunch advocate of the humanities, and his music attempts to be a means by which a natural message of peace and dialogue may exist between the Arab-Muslim world and European civilisation.

Dada continues to be a prolific composer, his music having been performed throughout the world, particularly in France and in North Africa, where he is regarded as a significant figure in art music. His five *Miniatures Algériennes: Aurore de Djurdjura; Danse Zaydan; Crépuscule sur la baie d'Alger; Danse de la jument; Soirée au Hoggar* – were first composed in 2010 for string orchestra or for string quartet, but their successful reception almost immediately led Dada to create a version for solo piano, which fully displays the composer's natural command of the modern-day post-Impressionist school.

The Moroccan composer **Nabil Benabdeljalil** (b.1972) is undoubtedly one of the leading composers today of what might be termed Afro-Art music. As Rebeca Omordia has written:

Benabdeljalil "is mostly known for his *Symphonie Marocaine en quatre tableaux*. Originally trained in the Russian tradition at the Tchaikovsky Academy of Music in Kyiv, followed by studies at the University of Strasbourg, Benabdeljalil's long engagement with traditional repertoires – including Arabic singing and his six Nocturnes for piano – represents a wonderful synthesis of his various stylistic approaches."

We can identify this synthesis in the two Préludes, the titles of which imply a continuing influence of Impressionism, but here not wholly Gallic as one refracted through the higher bright sunlight of North Africa. The titles alone imply the natural moods that these individual pieces undoubtedly invoke: *Magic Morning* and *Mirage et lumière*. As the composer has explained:

"*Magic Morning* ... is quite close to Debussy's Préludes. The music also reconciles atonal and Arabic touches, while exploring a new temporal and pictorial dimension, in which the 'Reflection' of light through harmony has its say."

In the very short *Mirage et lumière* this approach is heard at its most Impressionistically brief. Benabdeljalil's accompanying pieces, *Romance sans paroles* and *Frisson de la nuit*, equally demonstrate his exceptionally well-displayed gift for musical scene-painting, fully endorsing his claim as a creative artist

"to rediscover the poetic essence of musical expression, ignoring 'historical necessities' with implied prohibitions and orientations... My music may therefore occasionally reflect the essence of earlier periods, [yet is always] free from the constraints of a specific age or era."

The struggle for ethnic native independence has made a lasting impression on the life and music of **Mokale Koapeng** who was born in Soweto in 1963 and has since held workshops on South African vocal, choral and jazz music at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. He has also toured the USA, Canada and Europe many times. Witnessing the life-changing (in every sense) Soweto uprising of 1976 as a boy – he commemorated the event 30 years later in his choral-orchestral work *Cantus in Memoria '76* – Koapeng was raised in a music-loving family, although his father had, according to Koapeng, “only two years’ education”. European classical music and singing in local choirs were prime interests for his parents, and “music by Pedi dancers who danced on a small soccer field nearby on Sundays and played traditional music” left lasting impressions. Koapeng’s stylisation of native thematicism and rhythmic pulse has produced a characteristic voice in African music, as we hear in his **Prelude in D flat major**, for solo piano, about which the composer has written:

“In this piece I infuse African dance elements I grew up listening to and witnessing in various townships. The interlocking technique of idiophones is employed.”



The significant South African composer **Grant McLachlan** (b.1956) studied in London and Oxford before returning to South Africa in 1994. Amongst his chamber music compositions is a Sonatina for Double Bass and Piano, composed for Leon Bosch and based on native songs. The third movement, **Senzeni Na?** (What Have We Done?), became very popular in South Africa, especially in the composer’s concert version for solo piano. He has said of this work:

It “is a recreation for piano of an anti-apartheid protest song, often sung at funerals and at demonstrations. It is one of a number of traditional songs which have a strong resonance with the people of South Africa and which are inextricably linked to the struggle for freedom and democracy. It includes the lines: ‘What have we done? Is our sin that we are black?’

“The chorus part of the song has its origins in a Victorian psalm chant composed by Arthur Troyte in 1887, which reached South Africa through the missionaries in the Eastern Cape in the late 19th century. The transformation of the song with the addition of the solo voice makes it one of the most iconic and moving of all protest songs.”

Opening in moderate chordal fashion, the supporting lines are revealed one by one as the music unfolds.



Fela Sowande's *Two Preludes on Yoruba Sacred Folk Melodies* are among the earliest of the composer's published works and remain amongst the best known of them. They were written in 1945 and published by Novello that same year. The first of these, **K'A Mura**, which is the most often heard, is dedicated "To my mother", and it is prefaced by a quotation alluding to the Book of Amos: "Let us prepare, ye band of Christians, to meet above".

It is a remarkably original composition: based on the tonality (rather than written in the key) of D flat and marked "In free time, *Andante*", it deploys a descending quasi-scalic theme in which seconds and thirds unfurl as leaves of a flowering plant, transferred from left hand to right. In essence, it reveals a profoundly African musical print, as was taken by several European American composers from the southern-states music of African slaves. Sowande himself explained that the inherent individual quaver pulse remains, irrespective of melodic grouping. The result is a truly haunting piece of genuinely original composition: simple, yet entirely fresh in musical syntax – certainly for 1945.

Twelve years earlier, in Chicago in 1933, **Florence Price** became the first Black female composer to have a symphony premiered by a major national orchestra, when that city's Symphony Orchestra played her Symphony No.1. At the same concert, her friend and contemporary Margaret Bonds also made history as the first Black female soloist with the orchestra. She would later go on to premiere Price's Piano Concerto. Price and Bonds were the twin leaders in the Black Chicago Renaissance movement during the 1930s in the USA. The strength and determination of Florence Price, together with the undoubted quality of her music, were pivotal in the establishment of a Black composer's voice in American classical music concert-giving that still resonates today.

Florence Price's **Fantasia Nègre in E minor** was composed in 1929 and is dedicated to Margaret Bonds. It was the first of eventually four such works and is based on an actual spiritual, "Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass". But this is far more than a folk-type setting for solo piano. In many ways, Price harks back to the *Ballade* structures of Chopin and Brahms and, in so doing, demonstrates the wealth of invention of which she was manifestly capable.



Akin Euba (1935–2020) was in many ways the most distinguished Nigerian composer, musicologist and pianist of his generation. He composed much music and wrote extensively on African and especially Nigerian folk music, particularly as a source for art music. He was the creator of "African Pianism", a style of composition which aimed to join the inherent musical syntax of Nigerian Yoruba music to the European keyboard with connotations of fundamental harmony. To this end Akin Euba campaigned widely on the interculturalism in musical composition and performance. His concept of "African Pianism" alluded to the similarities between the piano as a Western instrument and several Nigerian traditional instruments, using the piano as a medium to express certain features of Nigerian traditional music. In **Wakar Duru** (Duru Song) Euba arranged three of Nigeria's most popular Yoruba songs, the inherent features of which are best exemplified in the second, wherein a relatively fast, yet inherently gentle music pervades this exceptionally fluent piece, often utilising ostinato-like figures.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2024

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“Rebeca’s technique knows no bounds... she plays with a depth of insight and understanding which is all too rare today.”

Julian Lloyd Webber, *London Magazine*

Hailed as an “African classical music pioneer” (*BBC World Service*) and “a classical music game changer” (*Classical Music*), London-based award-winning pianist Rebeca Omordia is an exciting virtuoso with a wide-ranging career as soloist, chamber musician and recording artist. She is artistic director and founder of the world’s first-ever African Concert Series, resident series at Wigmore Hall, London.

Described by *The Guardian* as “the pianist who cast a spell on Lagos”, in recent seasons Rebeca has toured Nigeria as a soloist, performing recitals and with the MUSON Symphony Orchestra in Lagos and Abuja. Her debut solo album for SOMM Recordings, *African Pianism* vol. 1, was described as a “real ear-opener” (Presto Music), and Rebeca toured worldwide in support of it, with performances at London’s Wigmore and Barbican Halls, Cambridge University, Manarat Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi (UAE), Sociedad Filarmónica de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain), for the Phillips Collection, Washington DC and at Onassis Stegi in Athens, Greece.

Rebeca has worked with an array of international musicians, including a three-year partnership with world-renowned British cellist Julian Lloyd Webber. Her partnership with South African double bass virtuoso Leon Bosch has seen the release of several recordings for Meridian Records.

Rebeca is also a talented arranger; her arrangement for cello and harp of the choral work *The Seal Lullaby* by Eric Whitacre was released on Deutsche Grammophon with Julian Lloyd Webber and Catrin Finch.

Rebeca was born in Romania to a Romanian mother and a Nigerian father. Having begun to establish a profile in her native country, after graduating from the National University of Music Bucharest where she studied with acclaimed Romanian pianist and professor Dana Borsan, she continued her studies in the UK at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Trinity College of Music in London with professor Mikhail Kazakevich. Rebeca holds a Doctor of Music degree from the National University of Music Bucharest.

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2 Preludes on Yoruba Sacred Folk Melodies
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AFRICAN PIANISM [vol. 1]

SOMMCD 0647

Composers: Akin Euba, Ayo Bankole, Christian Onyeji, David Earl,
Fred Onovwerosuoke, J.H. Kwabena Nketia, Nabil Benabdeljalil

“One cannot escape a sense of gratitude to Omordia, whose musical curiosity and imagination, bolstered by an admirably versatile technique, bring us a bounty of largely unfamiliar yet richly rewarding music.” – Patrick Rucker, *Gramophone*

African Pianism Volume 2

Rebeca Omordia *piano*

Girma Yifrashewa (b.1967)

1 Eilita – Cry of Joy 7:11

Salim Dada (b.1975)

*Miniatures Algériennes**

2 I. Aurore de Djurdjura 3:32

3 II. Danse Zaydan 3:40

4 III. Crépuscule sur la baie d'Alger 3:45

5 IV. Danse de la jument 1:44

6 V. Soirée au Hoggar 4:14

Nabil Benabdeljalil (b.1972)

7 Prélude I: Magic Morning* 3:27

8 Prélude II: Mirage et lumière* 1:44

9 Romance sans paroles* 3:35

10 Frisson de la nuit 9:03

Mokale Koapeng (b.1963)

11 Prelude in D flat* 2:07

Trad. arr. **Grant McLachlan** (b.1956)

12 **Senzeni Na?*** 3:02

Fela Sowande (1905–1987)

2 Preludes on Yoruba Sacred Folk Melodies

13 No.1 "KA Mura"* 5:18

Florence Price (1887–1953)

14 Fantasie Nègre in E minor 8:40

Akin Euba (1935–2020)

Wakar Duru: Studies in African Pianism

15 Study in African Pianism No.4* 4:28

16 Study in African Pianism No.1 4:54

17 Study in African Pianism No.2 5:48

Total duration: **76:15**

* First Recordings

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