

DESCRIBE EXPERIENCE: ARTISTIC RESEARCH ON CROSS-CULTURAL MUSIC PRACTICES

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After learning the balafon—a mallet percussion instrument of West Africa—with local musicians in Mali and Burkina Faso, I have commissioned composers Michiel De Malsche, Li Cheong, Juan Albarracín, Enric Riu, and Cornelia Zambila to create new music to apply, reflect, and narrate my experience of switching from Western marimba—my original instrument—to balafon practice.

These aims sound simple at first, as I thought that taking some balafon lessons in Europe and surfing on the internet would provide substantial sources for creativity and analysis. I did not feel very inspired though, until I visited Africa and experienced the musical culture there for a short but ample period of time. The *experience* of engaging as a musician in totally new ways yielded theoretical and philosophical insights. The balafon music structures began to make sense when I approached them through performing and learning the music with African musicians. I feel like I am standing at the crossroads of two worlds: the world of the African balafon and my world. I, who also bear a musical and cultural *tradition*, am *submitting* myself to a foreign music practice. Such contact between traditions is more than a mere musical one; it is grounded in human encounters that require thorough communication and understanding of practice, viewpoints, customs, and social behavior.

Artistic research into marimba and balafon music practices

This research project was first triggered by a question the audience often asks me after concerts: “I have never seen a marimba before, where does it come from?” People usually expect a unique and imaginative answer, namely that the instrument has an exotic origin outside Western music culture. They are overwhelmed by the marimba’s auditory world as its sound is far from their image of the typical drums and cymbals in a rock band. I would, then, explain briefly the possible origins of the marimba as described in the literature, with its relations to the Guatemala marimba, the Indonesian Gamelan, and the African balafon and indicate that the marimba is a modern version with a unique cultural background adapted by the Western music world. However, I gradually became doubtful about the truthfulness of this myth and raised some questions: How does the marimba actually connect to its ethnic roots? What is the ancestral relation between the marimba and its origins apart from the basic structure and the playing mechanism? A careful study into the history of the marimba and its

repertoire showed that the theory seems to be void.¹ Despite the similarities in instrument construction (i.e., a keyboard and the resonators) and the bodily striking mechanism, ethnic origins and the marimba only cross paths in the repertoires of modern and contemporary music. For instance, African music was an inspiration to minimalist Steve Reich, and Lou Harrison adapted the Gamelan in his compositions. Wouldn't it be interesting to bridge the music practices between the balafon and the marimba?

Yet, due to my limited knowledge of the genre, my first listening experience with the balafon was a shock. I could not appreciate the ultra-fast tempo, the non-Western temperament, and the powerful, loud strokes of the balafon. Nevertheless, these surprises have developed into enthusiasm. I wanted to understand how African musicians create such intense energy in a performance. I wondered how they obtain that bodily sensation and superb coordination, as if they are just playing a *game* of automatic physical movement. Although the rhythms and beats sound chaotic, the musicians clearly know what music they are playing. I became fascinated by the complex polyrhythm as a liberation and openness containing natural, crude beauty; it gave me a feeling of spontaneity rather than expressive emotions and sensibility.

Methodology

A multi-disciplinary research model that integrates artistic research methods with ethnomusicology and phenomenology is at the heart of this project (Figure 1). The two ethnomusicology tools of learning and participant observation have offered me the experience of *being* in the balafon music practice. I could have learned the music by reading transcriptions and the writings of African scholars, but the feeling and sensation of the music require involvement in the practice and culture. The head-on experience of the music gave me insights about how the music should be played. By *submitting* myself to be part of the practice—be it the oral tradition, the musical thinking, the holistic teaching approach, the embodied musical movement, or the functionality in the music—I recorded the experiences of my mind and body in sensing, thinking, or dreaming in the music culture. In this stage of data collection, I began to reveal how I, the performer-researcher, responded to the music. While following every instruction given by my African teachers, I have maintained my personal view as a Western, classically trained marimbist. I did not attempt to “go native” nor strive to *become* an African balafonist, since my purpose is to reflect on the process of adopting the balafon

¹ Invented in about 1918 by American instrument builder Deagan and Leedy (Deagan Resource, J.C. Deagan and U.G. Leedy built the first marimba, model number 350, during 1918 to 1925 in Chicago, USA), some say the prototype of the marimba was inspired by the African instrument, while others claim the Guatemala marimba is the marimba's closest ancestor.

techniques and practices, and to be able to discuss the changes in my own artistic perspective and create new music with these experiences. Such detachment from the balafon helps me to obtain a comparative approach in this research.

As the performer-researcher renders the experiential feeling of foreign music practice, the mode of research contains contents that are made up of my subjective character. What I saw and understood from balafon culture is dependent on my own temperament, cultural background, personality, gender, and nationality. The research pertains to the idiosyncrasy of the artist-researcher, in which their methods depend on their specific artistic research interests. I have chosen to obtain my knowledge through performing and learning the balafon by immersing myself in the African practice. Whereas the central aim of a composer is an analysis of the musical forms and the adaptation of these ideas in their own compositions, a linguist and ethnomusicologist would investigate the diffusion history of a particular African instrument by tracking the history of the people's language usage. I must articulate in a more systematic way the ineffable experience of playing music, such as music embodiment, the expertise of playing the instrument, learning by ear, and the experience of switching between two music practices. The focal point is the interpretation of my experiential knowledge of balafon music practice.

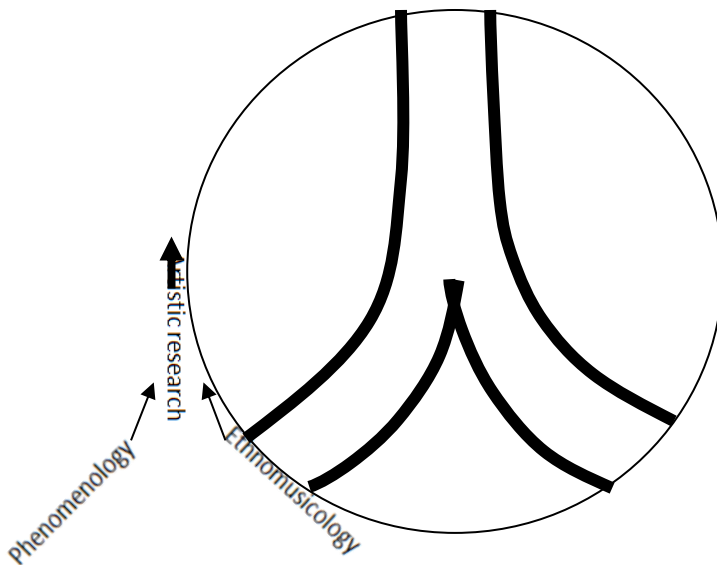


Figure 1: A multi-disciplinary research model for artistic research, ethnomusicology, and phenomenology.

Music program

Inner Sight Etudes | Cornelia Zambila (2016)

#1 Walking to the Shadow

#2 Five Senses of Fire

#3 Lullaby

(Only three out of the total 11 movements)

Sound Portrait V for solo marimba | Enric Riu (2015)

Transposons for solo marimba | Cheong Li (2017)

Collected in the program *In the Dawn of Change*, you will watch in the video of the lecture-recital three compositions commissioned in my PhD project “Inventing New Marimba Performance from the African Balafon Music Practice”: *Inner Sight Etudes* by Cornelia Zambila (Romania) investigates into the sensorial experience of the performer leaving her comfort zone of changing from marimba to balafon, and wearing a blindfold, the performer improvises for 30 minutes based upon the metaphysical ideas suggested by the composer, such as textures and natural phenomenon; in *Sound Portrait V*, Enric Riu (Spain) designed a graphical score to co-create with the performer and to guide the time structure and musical patterns of the performance; *Transposons* by Dr. Cheong Li (Hong Kong) creates a scientific metaphor for the idiomatic musical element embedded in balafon music, which is constantly developing and changing in position and shape and is capable of re-creation and reverse mutation.