

Here are a few bios...take your pick.

### **The Short Punchy Bio:**

It took Derek Gripper untold hours of painstaking work to transcribe note-for-note the complex compositions of Malian kora player Toumani Diabaté and find a way of playing them on six-string guitar. The results appeared on his ninth album, *One Night on Earth*, recorded with an orchestra of crickets (who he didn't invite). The album created an unprecedented meeting point between the written tradition of Western classical music and the oral tradition of the West African griots and most importantly allowed Derek to make many friends in the streets of Bamako without being able to speak a word of French or Bambara.

Critical acclaim was quick to follow. Classical guitar legend John Williams said he thought it was "absolutely impossible until I heard Derek Gripper do it" and was really pleased that somebody was playing new music on the classical guitar. Toumani Diabaté himself asked for confirmation that it was indeed just one person playing one guitar which delighted Derek who had considered giving up music when he first heard Diabaté's multi layered solo recordings. Both invited Derek to collaborate with them: Derek performed with Williams in London's Shakespeare's Globe and King's Place, and with Diabaté and his Symmetric Orchestra at the Acoustik Festival Bamako, Mali. He also played with Trio da Kali at Carnegie Hall and won a Songlines Award for the best album in Africa and the Middle East.

Which is amazing because Derek has never been to the Middle East. He has been to (and played in) the USA, Canada, Britain, a lot of Europe, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Namibia, Australia, Malaysia, India and Mali.

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*“Gripper has cracked it...his playing has a depthless beauty, which does full justice to the complexity of Toumani’s compositions. To do so without any hint of the music being dumbed down is a staggering achievement on solo guitar.” [Nigel Williamson, Songlines Magazine]*

*“More than a labour of love, Gripper has brought a new purity to the dream-like improvisatory nature of these compositions. My recording of the year, so far!” [Tim Panting, Classical Guitar Magazine]*

*“The result is astounding, not just for its technical brilliance, but its musicality. Gripper executes these pieces with the precision and attention to detail one might expect from a great classical musician...It’s hard to imagine a more impressive and passionate rendering of Malian music on classical guitar.” [Banning Eyre, Afropop Worldwide]*

*“A true synthesis and a great album.” [Ian Kearey, fRoots]*

### **The ‘What Kind of Music Do You Play’ Bio:**

Derek has created his music out of a small cluster of diverse influences. His guitar playing owes a lot to the guitar style created by Brazilian composer Egberto Gismonti. From Gismonti Derek gets his love of timbre, pulsing drones in different parts of the guitar and epic sonic scope. Unlike Gismonti, however, Derek’s harmonic language does not come from jazz and classical music, but rather from the music of Africa: Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe... a language which Derek learned by painstakingly transcribing works by some of these country’s greatest performers: Toumani Diabaté, Ali Farka Touré, Salif Keita, Amadou Bansang Jobarteh, Baaba Maal, Madosini, Chiwoniso etc. The thread of these different musical styles and approaches to guitar playing are held together by a vision Derek had in India in 1997. He thought it would be great to do what Keith Jarrett did in his solo piano concerts. Derek imagined a guitar player that could improvise for over an hour without boring his listeners to tears. He imagined the guitar being re-tuned and reinvented, as the music unfolded, and the result being a music as symphonic and intimate as Jarrett’s series of solo piano concert recordings. As time went on this seemed a little optimistic for a mere six string guitar, but at recent concerts and recording sessions (The CNN Session, 25 Minutes in North Vancouver, for example) Derek realised that this forgotten idea was starting to take form.

### **The ‘What Kind of Concert Will This Be’ Promotional Material Bio (complete with press quotes):**

Derek Gripper’s concerts explore the dialogue between the disparate styles that have informed his work to date: Kora, Bach, South African jazz, Contemporary Classical and large scale improvisations. Quotations of Bach, Malian songs, virtuosic kora compositions, Southern African bow music, and

avant-garde Brazilian guitar music combine to create a new solo guitar which is at once intimate and explosive, improvised and composed, traditional and new.

In these solo concerts, sometimes a continuous hour or more of uninterrupted music, the guitar is explored in all its possibilities, even the tuning and retuning becomes part of the instrument's musical resources converting it from moment to moment to new tonalities and resonances as the music finds the common ground between Derek's diverse interests and abilities.

This kind of extended improvisation and recomposition of such diverse repertoire is rarely seen in the world of classical guitar and presents as new possibility for African Guitar and a new expression of the music of Great African Composers.

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## **The Historical Bio:**

Derek Gripper is a classical guitarist who has taken a unique path. As a South African classical musician he found limited by the music of the traditional classical guitar and so went on a journey through different musical styles, returning always to the guitar to find ways of bringing what he learned onto the instrument.

His studies took him to India where he learned the rudiments of the Carnatic percussion language, and then to the farms of the Western Cape where he created an “avant-ghoema” string quartet language (Sagtevei 2001) with South African composer and trumpeter Alex van Heerden. He then began to explore the limits of the classical guitar’s sonority, first on eight string guitar evocations of Cape Town folk music (Blomdoorns 2003), then in compositions on a guitar by legendary luthier Hermann Hauser (Ayo 2008, Kai Kai 2009) and then in transcriptions by Brazilian composer Egberto Gismonti (The Sound of Water 2012) whose solo guitar works are an explosive rewriting of classical guitar, world music, jazz and contemporary classical. The album combines Gismonti’s music with Derek’s own compositions.

In 2012 he completed a ten year project to understand and translate the music of the West African kora (21 string harp) virtuoso Toumani Diabate to solo guitar, resulting in two critically acclaimed albums, *One Night on Earth* (Songlines Top of the World) and *Libraries on Fire*, the latter receiving a Songlines award for “Best Album Africa and Middle East” in 2017. The recognition from these albums resulted in concert tours the world over, performances at venues such as Carnegie Hall, and collaborations with classical guitar legend John Williams, Indian guitar master Debashish Bhattacharya, and West African Musicians such as Trio da Kali and Toumani Diabate himself.

In 2017 Derek returned to the studio and to his musical roots to record an album of the solo violin works of Bach, arranged on solo guitar and delivered with the phraseology and fire of a musician who has steeped himself in musics outside of the classical canon. That album is due for release in 2018.

### **Thought Provoking Programme Notes Bio:**

In the Western Classical tradition the idea of the composer has changed over time, but it has usually involved some or other form of written score which is then interpreted by the performer. Today there are many composers whose works are never committed to paper: songwriters, electronic musicians, “world” musicians, jazz musicians. We sometimes speak about these musicians using different terms, saying they improvise or they play traditional music, but when it comes to assigning performing rights we talk about them as having composed the music they perform and record. So the realm of composition is one which has greatly enlarged, and this recital seeks to do this too, to enlarge the ideas of what comprises a composition and a composer.

Classical musicians are primarily interpreters. They take a given text and find a way to bring it to life in sound. There are many different approaches, academic or personal. But this art of interpretation, which is the core of classical music, has not always taken into account today’s enlarged realm of the composer. There have been many successful collaborations across the musical divides, for example Kronos Quartet’s recent collaboration with Malian Trio da Kali, a recent recording of works composed by griots living an aural/oral tradition, collaborating with a classically trained string arranger and a

string quartet reading scores. But it is rare that a work from a composer outside of the classical discipline of written composition is interpreted by a classically trained musician, there is usually always some sort of intermediary or arranger involved. The barriers are many, from both sides, but it is mostly a problem of translation.

In 2011 I started writing down the kora compositions of Toumani Diabate, famed virtuoso of the twenty-one stringed harp called the kora. I managed to find a way to play these scores on the guitar, creating a means to begin interpreting his works on an entirely different instrument. When I began to play and record Toumani's music I was a non griot playing the music usually learned and played by griots. I was also a guitarist playing music originally for the kora, a guitarist suddenly stumbling upon an entirely new repertoire, an African repertoire which had not been available to classical guitarists before. To have done this inside of the aural/oral tradition I would have needed to lengthy apprenticeship with a griot, in person. But as a classical musician and a guitarist I was able to use my skills by changing my idea of Toumani and his role in the music. I had to see him as a composer, and his recordings as "scores." When I had made this conceptual shift my musical world expanded and it was just a simple problem of translation from one medium to another.

In the beginning I was treating Toumani's recordings as set compositions, and this is how I first recorded them in "One Night on Earth" in 2012. It was important to do this to make the point that from the point of view of a classical musician Toumani Diabate was a great African composer, even while he was a musician from a traditional lineage and a griot. But as time went on I started understanding the language, perhaps you could say more as a first language speaker, or a more fluent second language speaker. As time went on things began to develop further and my relationship to the "compositions" shifting from one of interpreter to one of co-composer.

In 2016 I had the opportunity to actually visit Mali after being invited by Toumani himself. Here I could finally experience how Malian musicians approached this same act of translation, interpretation, and co-composition. I discovered that these pieces, passed as they are from father to son and mother to daughter, are somewhere in the middle of improvisation and interpretation. On one hand the original is very much present, on the other hand the reading is very loose and creative. So that was the first change I made in my performances, straying further from the "text" and creating interpretations which were somewhat different to the originals. The beginning of these more improvisatory readings can be heard on "Libraries on Fire," my recording from 2016.

More recently the idea of composition has undergone a further change in my kora interpretations, a further change of the word and its meaning, especially as it relates to African music. The act of composition is very different in African music. A new song by Salif Keita, or a new bow piece by South African musician Madosini, is often based on something older, a piece from a repertoire handed down from previous generations. The changes made in the act of composition are sometimes

incremental, small and subtle, yet the new work is still considered to be an original composition. This reflects a sociological difference: the musician does not stand alone, he or she is part of a wider social and musical context, and this is reflected in the music. This differs from the Western notion, or even myth, of a composer being a lone creator, a myth which is very much prevalent into the idea of improvisation which has grown out of jazz, and is very much a factor in popular music, a myth which has been the cornerstone of music from at least the nineteenth century (musicians like John Cage challenged this notion by including the audience, spontaneity and chance into the process of composition and performance).

Within the Western context of the single creator, the influences on a particular work are very closely scrutinised and something which is too close to the original is considered plagiarism. A very good example is Led Zeppelin's very close quotations/appropriations of older American blues. While this may or may not be plagiarism, cultural appropriation or a clear case of copyright infringement, this type of creative music marketing is not frowned upon in the African context. A good example among many is the song Lam Tooro by Baaba Maal which uses the melody, note for note, from an older griot song called Massane Cisse, recorded by many musicians (for example Sory Kandia Kouyate in the early seventies, a decade before Maal's composition). Maal's version changes the accompaniment and the words but the melody is intact. Even though the original is well known by many West Africans, to my knowledge Maal has yet to endure a court case similar to the one experienced by Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." This is because the premise is different, the records of an "original" are less specific, and the source is communal, even though the process is identical.

Looking more deeply into these factors of composition and improvisation within the context of performing kora music (and other music) has had the result that my more recent music includes more elements of my own composition and improvisation than were evident in the recordings mentioned above. The new compositions are often based on something in my repertoire, a piece by Egberto Gismonti or Bach, or a traditional kora piece, or a kora piece by a contemporary player like Toumani, but this seed could be completely altered or hidden, or simply be a point of departure which is then discarded in the final piece. I think this is consistent with the approach to performance in African music, the only change being that the application of this approach is to a wider repertoire outside of the griots music.

The composers whose works I draw on are Malian and Gambian kora players Toumani Diabate, Ballake Sissoko, Amadou Bansang Jobarteh, Sekou Batourou Kouyate and Sidiki Diabate, songwriters Salif Keita, Baaba Maal and Fanta Sacko, Brazilian composer Egberto Gismonti, South African bow player Madosini, and of course J.S. Bach.

## **The First Person History Bio**

I began playing music on the violin. My teacher was a woman called Mrs de Groot who was very patient with me even though I very rarely practiced. She said I could probably be a violinist in an orchestra one day but that I probably wouldn't be able to be a soloist. Later on I gave her prediction some thought and decided to learn guitar so I could play by myself.

My piano teacher at school was a wonderful classical guitarist, Michael Hoole, and slowly he inspired me to take up the guitar. I started lessons by sitting outside his teaching room learning pieces he gave me as he passed (his timetable was full and he couldn't take on another student). I took the scores, played the notes on the piano, and found them on guitar. My first piece was "Lagrima." Eventually he started giving me lessons. I was playing bass guitar as well, in bands with friends. We started playing the Cape Town club circuit when I was about fifteen or sixteen.

After years of playing in bands I got tired of being a bass player and got together with three friends, Christian van der Vyver (who now performs prepared dobro under the name Chris Rainer), Chris Stroud and Lara Bloch. We started an ensemble called The Gilgamesh Ensemble. We booked venues and played concerts for a little over a year. Vocals, cello, myself on viola and guitar, and Chris on guitar. We brought in tablas and sitar (I tried to stop them) and harmonium and we even recorded an album.

Gilgamesh had an important outcome for me because I was asked to help arrange string music for a performance on Robben Island. Strangely enough most of my musical future would be set by these four days on the island. The musicians I met, Robbie Jansen (the great Cape Jazz sax player), Alex van Heerden (his trumpet player and leader of the psychedelic vastrap band Gramadoelas), Brydon Bolton (bass player), and an Indian percussionist called Sivamani who was visiting Cape Town at the time.

Three important things came of this:

I became friends with Alex and Brydon who I would play with for over ten years in different formats, Sivamani invited me to India where I began a series of trips as a student of Carnatic music theory, and, perhaps most importantly, I shook the hand of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island - he was there for his first visit back to the island since he was moved to the mainland preceding his release in 1991 (He watched the music without looking away once, while everyone else was distracted).

In India, after being greatly humbled by the South Indian violin virtuosos I heard, and after having a few violin lessons on Carnatic violin in Chennai, I returned home to focus on guitar. I had an idea to

create a guitar music that explored the resources of the guitar, almost as Keith Jarrett explored the piano, to change tunings mid song, and to create long extended improvisations.

I had a guitar made, with eight strings and fretboards that could be removed and replaced with other fretboards with different tunings. I studied the theoretical works of Harry Partch and Rameau and Hindemith and tried to imagine a compositional theory that was not constrained by the philosophies of the past, or one that reflected the philosophies of the present. I was reading Adorno and also systems theorists like Gregory Bateson and linguists like Chomsky...trying to understand the relationship between the map and the territory, the language and what is spoken. I was asking myself, “is it possible make new music using the tools of the old worlds without simply reproducing the same consciousness of this old music?”

Then Alex van Heerden and I started working together. Alex was a trumpet player in the school marching band, then jamming in the local township with jazz bands, then learning to play Afrikaans songs on the accordion at a small town church. We made an album called Sagtevei which was our new form of Cape music, using string quartet and his trumpet, voice and accordion. I played viola. We did more of this for ten years, and during this time I also started recording solo albums on guitar. We recorded Sagtevei in a fit of creative excitement during a few days on a farm outside Cape Town, then we travelled to Sweden and laid the ground for my first solo guitar album Blomdoorns, and then we met up again a few years later to write a string quartet which we performed together twice (with The Sontonga Quartet) and sadly only recorded very roughly in the first performance. Then we played a concert together with our friend Brydon Bolton on double bass and two weeks later Alex was killed in a car accident. It had been ten years of incredible music making and I wonder if I will ever be lucky enough to find somebody who I connect with in music like that again. Perhaps once is all you get.

I spent the years just before and after Alex’s death (2009 in a car accident) exploring the implications of what we had created together, trying to bring them onto solo guitar (most of our work together had been with me playing viola or writing for strings). This started with Blomdoorns on eight string guitar, the year after Sagtevei, two more solo albums (Kai Kai and Ayo) and a duo album with tabla virtuoso Udai Mazumdar (Rising). I released Alex, Brydon and my final concert as the album Ale!x.

I continued to return to Bach which had inspired and informed by my classical guitar studies and also my studies with eight string guitarist Paul Galbraith in 2006 in Brazil. The result was a record called Prayers and Dances, where I began the experimentation with playing Bach on guitar that continues to this day. After this recording my work with kora music made the path towards Bach far more clear, and I have recently made a second Bach album which I feel is closer to how I would like to hear the music on guitar. The record is due for release early in 2017.



In 2012 I started thinking differently about Toumani Diabate who I had been listening to since 2000. I had finally found a composer i really loved whose music could fit on guitar, and the arrangements I made of his music and the music of other kora players was recorded on *One Night on Earth: Music from the Strings of Mali*, and later in an original sound installation for the Venice Biennale, inspired by kora (*Cassette Locale*), and lastly *Libraries on Fire*, the music of three generations worth of kora players in one album.

It was during this phase that my international career got busier, mostly because of an invite to play with classical guitar legend John Williams at Shakespeare's Globe. We played duets together based on kora compositions, with John's parts written by Cape Town guitarist Reza Khota. I also worked with a Cape Town violinist Galina Jurgita to make a string quartet version of Toumani and Sidiki's *Miniyamba* which they premiered in Turkey, and more recently have created a full programme of string quartet music with Chris Letcher, SA's most famous arranger. 53