

BALLAKÉ SISSOKO & VINCENT SEGAL – CHAMBER MUSIC

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For any musician, playing as a duo is an experience that definitely stands apart. It pursues the ideal of the one-on-one, the context where the voices of the protagonists fuse together inside the crucible of common thought, and where the notion of sharing is placed at the very origins of an instrument's movement. It requires not only exceedingly high quality in the discourse, but also an exceptional listening-quality. Within a duo, the ear—the first authentic instrument of the musician—is where everything is played.

This art of conversation based on understanding, on the attentiveness of one musician towards the other, is developed here by kora player Ballaké Sissoko and cellist Vincent Segal to its highest degree of exactness. *Chamber Music* is an album that might have remained a mere sound-document that testified to a brief encounter within a mixed-breed cultural context. Fortunately, it's much more than that. Formerly stable-mates at the same label (Label Bleu), the two men began by taking time to forge a close, personal bond of friendship. The idea of working together on an album germinated in Ballaké Sissoko's mind a few years ago; Sissoko had been present at a concert given by Bumcello at the Amiens Jazz Festival, where Vincent Segal had been playing with Cyril Atef, the other half of the explosive Bumcello duo. But there was no need for either to precipitate matters. As the Malian musician says, "It was important to get to know each other musically. For quite some time we got together at Vincent's home whenever I was in Paris, and we also played a few concerts. We built our complicity step by step. Today, when we play, we understand each other without saying a word: one look is enough. Our hearts are together."

This care brought to the human aspect of all music is something that Sissoko and Segal have been cultivating for more than two decades—Sissoko's strings have notably crossed paths with those of Taj Mahal or the pianist Ludovic Einaudi, whilst Segal has enjoyed many roles as an accompanist, arranger or producer with such diverse performers as Cesaria Evora, -M-, Blackalicious, Piers Faccini, Sting or Marianne Faithfull. Their respective careers have shown the importance they attach to communicating thoughts and sensations. The pair came from multi-secular musical backgrounds—the Mandinka *griot* tradition for Sissoko, the classical school for Segal—and it would have been easy for them to remain locked inside such mapped formats, both in music and in life. But they transformed the historic significance of their instruments and original cultures into objects they could carry with them, luggage with which they could travel and slake their thirst for knowledge. In May 2009, when Sissoko and Segal finally decided to record together in Bamako, they once again applied these principles dictated by a simple, illuminating common ethic, one whose terms the Frenchman describes succinctly as: "You just look for the pleasure of music where you can."

The pleasure of music, here, is condensed into the time-space that the two friends created for themselves: one bare room in Salif Keita's Moffou studio and three recording-sessions without overdubs that were woven inside the protective cocoon of the Mali night. Sheltered from the agitation of mankind inside the heart of the world, Ballaké Sissoko and Vincent Segal chased out of their minds everything that can distance a musician from his art—all the vain considerations of genre and style that only have interest for collectors of labels—the better to

concentrate on the essence: harmonious imbrications of language and signatures, and the interlacing of their inner song, to which the subtle waves of improvisation and the secret vibrations of silence contributed additional density. Their complicity is such that the kora and the cello, far from resulting in an overly formal exchange of rejoinders, seem to express themselves here with a single voice: Sissoko et Segal mix their blood and their sounds to conclude a pact that aims to cause a (precisely) unified *word* to spring forth with incomparable clarity. What the listener hears in *Chamber Music* is both rare and precious: two sensibilities in unison, on the same wavelength, creating music which, literally, follows naturally.

The same feeling of concord, the same impression of fluidity, inhabits the dialogue between the friends who intervene, friends to whom Sissoko and Segal opened their door. The voice of singer Awa Sangho drapes the solemn song *Regret*, composed as a tribute to vocalist Kader Barry, in a fine veil. On *Houdesti*, the long track on which all the quiet strengths composing this album seem to converge, Mahamadou Kamissoko (ngoni) and Fassery Diabaté (balafon), both fleeting but significant presences, conjure out of the earth music that has been torn away from all trends and fashion. On two titles, Demba Camara causes the traditional karignan to crackle with all the science of a master of fire. Yet the entire record bears an imprint of infinite gentleness; it has softness that privileges, rather than modifies, the greatest intensity of expression. In recording this album, Vincent Segal says that musicians like songwriter Nick Drake or pianist Annette Peacock came to mind, both authors of pure outlines that contain the strength of etchings. The vibrating sketches of *Chamber Music* naturally confirm his vision: stripped of all superfluous material, they go straight to the heart of the prime, overwhelming truth of music.