

Jerome Balsab: Performing Gyl Diversity

By Mark Stone

At PASIC 2022 we honored the world-renowned Ghanaian percussionist Bernard Woma by celebrating his vast achievements through his induction into the PAS Hall of Fame. Thanks to Bernard's dedicated teaching and passionate performing, as well as the work of the late-great Ghanaian musician Kakraba Lobi, the gyl has become a truly global percussion instrument. Bernard and Kakraba were both virtuoso gyl artists who popularized the instrument throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. As a result of their tireless creative work and the continued efforts of their collaborators and students, the gyl is now taught and played throughout the world.

As a contemporary Ghanaian gyl artist, Jerome Balsab continues the vital work of Bernard Woma and Kakraba Lobi in Ghana, North America, and beyond, teaching numerous students and cultivating the instrument's rich musical heritage. While the contributions of Bernard and Kakraba to the percussive arts are widely known, PASIC 2023 will be Jerome's PASIC debut. Those of us who have had the privilege of studying at the Dagara Music Center in Ghana or hosting the Saakumu Dance Troupe abroad are already familiar with Jerome's incredible artistry. We are delighted that he will have an opportunity to share his musicianship and deep knowledge of gyl traditions with our wider percussion community in Indianapolis this November.

Jerome is one of the leading exponents of the gyl tradition in Ghana, including both the Greater Accra region, where he lives, and the Upper West Region, where he was born. He is an artist of the highest stature and a culturally unique performer. Jerome is currently director of gyl xylophone studies at the Bernard Woma Dagara Music Center (BWDMC), as well as lead xylophonist and musical director of the Saakumu Dance Troupe. Prior to Woma's passing in 2018, Jerome was assistant director of both the center and troupe. As the current director, he is responsible for leading all classes, rehearsals, and performances at the BWDMC.

Michael Woma, manager of the BWDMC in Ghana, says Jerome's work there is

essential in sustaining his uncle Bernard's vision and legacy. Michael explains, "Jerome has been with the BWDMC from the very beginning, and his sacrifice and all the ideas and the love he has for the BWDMC, it's unimaginable." Michael also praises the exceptional quality of Jerome's teaching and his ability to fully capture the interest of every learner. "The way Bernard used to teach, that is exactly how Jerome also teaches. In his teaching he has this zeal and energy that always pushes students to grasp the knowledge and ideas of what he's teaching."

Jerome began playing the gyl at age two and was initiated as a Gyl Guba (master gyl performer) through mentorship by his father and grandfather. In his youth,



JEROME BALSAB
Saturday, Nov. 11, 10 AM

he was selected to be a cultural leader at school and a choir leader at church. When he was 12, Jerome began playing the gyl professionally at Dagara funerals as well as government and church events in Ghana and neighboring Burkina Faso. In 1985, he began his professional teaching career in Sunyani, teaching music in Ghana's Bono Region.

Jerome later moved to Accra, Ghana's capital, where he joined the Ghana National Dance Ensembles at the University of Ghana and at the National Theatre as chief xylophonist. In 2009, he was selected to perform for President Obama during his visit to Ghana. On this occasion, Jerome presented the Dagara tradition of *bewaa* as a musical interlude for Obama's Durbar in Accra.

Jerome has been to the U.S. on 13 international tours with the Saakumu Dance Troupe, teaching and performing at concert venues, universities, and community centers throughout the country. As a member of the Bernard Woma Ensemble, he performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and he is a regularly featured artist with the Slyboots Circus in Buffalo, N.Y. Griffin Brady, Executive Director of BWDMC USA, has managed these tours over the past two decades. Griffin describes Jerome's mastery of the gyl: "For many listeners, Jerome's virtuosity on the gyl is evident immediately. The precision with which he places every note is brought into focus through the effortless execution of complex polyrhythmic ideas across an endless stream of fluid and engaging musical phrases. Musicians love to play with him because of his keen ear and reflexive ability to make magic in any moment. Dancers and singers love to perform with him because of his attention to detail and his natural instinct to serve the moment and performance as a whole, knowing how and when to lead and how and when to support."

Jerome is committed to promoting and sharing his culture both at home and abroad. In addition to his frequent international work, he continues to perform regularly at many Ghanaian festivals, in-

cluding the Kobine Festival, Kakube Festival, Kukurbagr Festival, and the national Nafac Festival, as well as Burkina Faso's Fecuda Festival. In addition, he has been given the honor of serving as the chief panel judge for the Kukurbagr Festival in Fielmuo, Ghana. Through his dedication to the gyl and its related cultural traditions, Jerome Balsab has become internationally recognized as a master performer and teacher.

DIVERSE GYL TRADITIONS

The gyl is the principal instrument of the Dagara, Birifor, and Sisala people of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast. Performed regularly at festivals and life-cycle events, the instrument is a symbol of cultural identity and played with great pride among members of these nations. As the marimba of West Africa, the gyl is part of the xylophone family and typically constructed from 14 to 18 slabs of *legaa* wood, suspended over gourd resonators. Membranes cover holes in these resonators, creating the instrument's distinct buzzing timbre, a sound that promotes individual and communal healing.

Jerome's 2023 PASIC presentation will not only enable attendees to get to know his work as a master gyl artist, but will also provide an opportunity for the PAS community to learn about the rich diversity of gyl traditions. While the gyl has been presented at many prior PASICs, performances have centered on the 14-key pentatonic *kogyl*. The *kogyl* is now quite familiar to our global percussion community, yet most percussionists outside of Ghana are not familiar with the myriad related gyl traditions. As Michael Vercelli states: "Within PAS, the gyl has gained popularity as a 'world music xylophone' and has reinforced the notion that the gyl itself defines xylophone culture in Ghana, often by overlooking the individual cultures that use and create with it. In an effort to familiarize PAS members with the broader diversity of instruments that are considered gyle, this performance/clinic will showcase the talent of master Dagara gyl performer and educator Je-

MARCHING Sessions

RUSSELL WHARTON AND THE CAVALIERS BASS LINE Excellence in Bass Drumming Friday, Nov. 10, 12 PM

In 50 minutes, Russell Wharton and The Cavaliers bass drum section will give you (almost) everything you need to know about bass drum pedagogy. Topics will include: Technique, Timing/rhythmic interpretation, Articulation, Tuning, Orchestration, Common problems, Breaking down challenging splits. All fundamental skills will be demonstrated by the 2023 Fred Sanford award-winning bass drummers from The Cavaliers.

Russell Wharton is one of the foremost educators in the marching bass drum community. He marched in The Cavaliers bass line from 2008-12, including the Fred Sanford award-winning 2011 line. In 2015, Russell joined The Cavaliers staff as a bass tech, and in 2019 was named Battery Coordinator. Russell is proud to have helped the 2023 percussion section capture the Fred Sanford award. Russell also teaches at Rhythm X and Middle Tennessee State University. He has also worked with the Boston Crusaders, Monarch, and Cavaliers Indoor Percussion. Russell also writes music for marching ensembles and multimedia concert settings.

Founded in 1948, The Cavaliers are one of the most successful drum and bugle corps in history, winning 20 national championships, including seven DCI world championships since 1992. The group performs at more than 30 competitions across the U.S. and for more than 100,000 fans. The mission of The Cavaliers is to provide the members with life-changing experiences, educationally and socially, which help each individual member gain real-world life skills, musical training, and performance experiences.

INTERACTIVE MARCHING WORKSHOP WITH ROGER CARTER Saturday, Nov. 11, 2 PM

DRUMMER'S HERITAGE CONCERT FEATURING PERFORMANCES BY TIM GOSS, DAVE LOYAL, COLIN MASON & JO NAZRO Friday, Nov. 10, 5 PM

POWERHOUSE ARRANGING WITH MIKE JACKSON & KEVIN SHAH Saturday, Nov. 10, 4 PM

rome Balsab, to promote the multiplicity of gylil cultures."

In addition to the familiar kogylil, Jerome's presentation will include the *kpankpol gylil*, *bogylil*, *logylil*, *degaar gylil*, and urban metal gylil.

The *kpankpol gylil* is a trough xylophone commonly played by children. Rather than using gourds to amplify the sound of its wooden bars, as heard with other gylil, the *kpankpol gylil*'s keys are suspended over a hole in the ground. This trench creates a common resonating chamber for all the keys. The *kpankpol gylil* is often found at homes of gylil makers. Bernard Woma wrote that the instrument is "used by children to develop their playing skills. It is also the musical instrument used for recreational moonlight dancing at night by the youth."¹

Unlike the relatively equidistant pentatonic sound of the kogylil, the *bogylil* is tuned to a tetratonic scale with widely varying intervals. The *bogylil* is an important instrument among the *Birifor* and is

also referred to as the "festival gylil," given its prominence at *Bori* festivals. Alex Smith describes the instrument as "intricately connected to significant functions within the Bori religion, and thus is an instrument of value for Bori practitioners."²

The gylil from Lawra, Ghana is a large xylophone known at the *logylil* with a rich bass sound. It is a pentatonic instrument, but like the *bogylil* consists of widely varying intervals, creating what some have described as a minor sound.³ The *logylil* is commonly played at funerals in Lawra and surrounding areas. In addition, it is used for funeral announcements among the *Dagara*.

Another massive instrument, the *degaar gylil* consists of 17 or 18 keys with the lowest key reserved for *kpagru* playing, without a gourd resonator hung beneath. The *kpagru* is the timeline in gylil music, played with the end of the stick rather than the rubber mallet head. The cutting percussive sound of wooden sticks striking the wooden bars propels *Dagara*

music forward. The remaining 16 keys of the *degaar gylil* are similar to other instruments with gourd resonators suspended beneath and played with the rubber end of the mallets. This gylil is most closely associated with the virtuosic *Dagara* funeral music of *Bine*.

Finally, the newest member of the gylil family is an instrument made with metal roofing sheets rather than wooden bars. This urban gylil is found in cities where roofing sheets are plentiful but *legaa* wood is scarce. With its metallic keys, the urban gylil is akin to the vibraphone or gendèr of the gamelan orchestra. However, the instrument retains the gourd resonators as heard in most other gylil traditions and its resulting sound remains distinct. As an urban instrument, this gylil is usually tuned to a Western major pentatonic scale.

In his PASIC presentation, Balsab will perform on all the instruments described above while discussing their construction, history, and performance contexts. He will share the unique repertoire asso-

WORLD Combined Session

LOUIS RAYMOND-KOLKER Thursday, Nov. 9, 10 AM

Louis Raymond-Kolker is a composer and percussionist who is a member of Inside Out Steelband, Larkspur Percussion Duo, and Trace Chamber Society, and who teaches at High Point University. Louis actively works to facilitate the creation and performance of new music, and foster connections between composers, performers, and audiences. His compositions blend a sense of sentimentality, vivid imagery, and treating silly things seriously (and vice versa). As a performer, Louis specializes on steelpan and regularly premieres new works for instruments in the steelpan family. Louis is a member of the Dream Educators Collective and the Black Swamp Percussion Educator Network. His compositions are published through C. Alan Publications (solo, chamber, and orchestra) and Boxfish Music Publishing (steelband).

CAMI AKHAMIE Drum Melodically Thursday, Nov. 9, 10 AM

At this session, Cami Akhamie will perform a three-minute percussion solo showcasing his unique setup; perform one of his original songs; briefly talk about his setup

and influences; play to a vocal metronome in 7/8; trade solos with a guest drummer; and close with a percussion solo.

Camellia "Cami" Akhamie Kies is a military veteran, professional drummer, percussionist, music producer, drum instructor, and social media influencer. In 2009 she began her professional music career with the United States Navy's Seventh Fleet Band in Yokosuka, Japan. After leaving the U.S. Navy, Cami graduated from the University of Maryland with a Bachelor of Science degree in Digital Media and Web Technology. In 2019 she went on a World Tour with Latin Grammy winner Buika. Cami is well known on social media for her tiny creative percussion setups and her unique African infused rhythms. Cami released her first album in 2020 titled *I Choose Love*. Over the past two years Cami has released four singles, and she plans to release her second album in Nov. 2023.

JAMES KOO Combined World Showcase Concert Thursday, Nov. 9, 10 AM

This session will involve multiple artists showcasing unique repertoire representative of their culture. James Koo will be showcasing

a variety of instruments from traditional Chinese percussion. The program will range from contemporary composers such as Lei Liang and Rachel C. Walker to more traditional pieces by Li Min Xiong. Instruments featured will include Bangu, Paigu, and unique multi-percussion setups that highlight elements of Chinese culture.

James Koo is an award-winning percussionist who has dedicated much of his artistry to the promotion of Traditional Chinese music through the contemporary classical genre. In 2022 his recording of *Trans* (Lei Liang) was featured and awarded in the Black Swamp Multi Percussion Showcase. In 2021 his recording of *Dialectal Percussions* (Lei Liang) was awarded Best Work by an Asian Composer at the Chicago International Music Festival. In 2022 he was a featured soloist performing "All Rise" with Wynton Marsalis and The Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra. Additionally, he has performed and worked with Silk Road Ensemble member and Grammy award-winning artist Kaoru Watanabe.

ciated with each of these gyl traditions. In his performance/clinic he will be accompanied by several of his senior American students.

Jerome is looking forward to performing gyl diversity for the PAS community, stating, "I'm going to showcase my gyle for them to actually feel the resonance and buzzing of the gyl – the spirit of the gyl!" He takes great pride in carrying on the legacy of his dear friend Bernard Woma, noting that they played together since childhood and that, like Bernard, he is a left-handed gyl performer. Jerome is excited to share his culture and present indigenous West African xylophone music in the contemporary setting of PASIC. "I want to show other people how traditionally the xylophone sounds and how it feels."

CELEBRATING THE GYL AT PASIC 2023

In addition to Jerome Balsab's performance/clinic of diverse gyl traditions,

Valerie Naranjo and Ichitey James will perform a showcase concert of gyl music (see related article in this issue).

In this year's World Percussion Committee Panel, The Gyl – Roots and Branches, moderator Mark Stone will lead a discussion exploring the deep roots of gyl traditions in West Africa and the many branches of gyl music rapidly growing worldwide. The panel will discuss the origins of the instrument among gyl cultures of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast. The panel will also explore contemporary directions performers and educators are pursuing with the gyl on the global stage and in classrooms around the world. The discussion will include performance examples of both traditional and contemporary gyl music. Mark will be joined by a distinguished panel of gyl practioneers/educators to include Jerome Balsab, Ichitey James, and Valerie Naranjo.

ENDNOTES

1. Woma, "The Socio-Political Dimension of Dagara Funeral Ritual, Music and Dirge." Master's Thesis, Indiana University, 2012. 42
2. Smith, John Alexander. "Saving the Songwood: Global Consumption, Sustainability, and Value." Michigan State University, 2019. 43.
3. Woma, "The Socio-Political Dimension of Dagara Funeral Ritual, Music and Dirge."

Mark Stone, Guba, is an improviser-composer and performer-scholar with a passion for using music to bring diverse communities together. An internationally recognized percussionist, he has performed with the foremost musicians of Uganda, Ghana, South Africa, India, Trinidad, Ecuador, Brazil, and the United States. At Oakland University, Stone coordinates the world music and percussion programs in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. [PN](#)

WORLD Sessions

DENDÊ MACÊDO Afro-Brazilian Rhythms Friday, Nov. 10, 3 PM

In this introductory class in Afro-Brazilian percussion, participants will learn to play traditional, sacred, and popular rhythms with a former member of Timbalada. Dendê Macêdo will teach traditional rhythms from *candomblé* and *samba de roda* as well as the original rhythms and breaks from bands like Timbalada, Ilê Aiyê, and Olodum.

Dendê Macêdo is a percussionist, singer, composer, bandleader, teacher, and multi-instrumentalist. Since 2001, he's been splitting his time between the U.S. and Bahia and working with his folkloric group Ologundê and his flagship band Dendê & Band, who have performed at such venues as the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles; the KW Latinfest in Ontario, Canada; the Penang World Music Festival in Malaysia; Summerdance in Chicago, and the Chile Pepper Fiesta at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. He has provided workshops, clinics, and residency programs throughout the U.S. and Brazil at Lincoln Center, the Juilliard School, the Eastman School of Music, and the Peabody Conservatory, among many others.

LA JARANA A Unique Way of Playing Cymbals, Snare, and Bass Drum Saturday, Nov. 11, 3 PM

Over the past 11 years, La Jarana has been fusing Latin American popular music and jazz with one of the most representative percussion ensembles of popular Uruguayan music: Murga Drum Set ("Batería de Murga"). Their second album, *Agradable Sujeto* (2020), endeavors to bring these three musical aspects together in a balanced and elaborated way through the medium of original compositions. The particular way in which they take advantage of the Uruguayan Murga Drums, as well as how they elaborate the arrangements that fuse them with the vibraphone, saxophone, and electric bass, has caught the attention of the public and other musicians.

La Jarana is a contemporary jazz-percussion ensemble consisting of vibraphone, electric bass, saxophone, and a Murga drum set. Three instruments form the set: a bass drum, cymbals, and a snare drum – each of them executed by a different percussionist. The band is on the continuous search to fuse the rhythmic and pitch-related language of the Uruguayan Murga drum set with other

genres and musical languages such as jazz, tango, Brazilian, Cuban, and Argentinean folklore, among others.