



Listening to new classics at Africa Day concert

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A kora; a harp-lute used by Mandingo peoples in West Africa. Photo: wikimedia commons

CAPE TOWN – A Nigerian Kora player, a South African composer, a Kenyan master of ceremonies and Western Cape Premier Helen Zille were among musicians, VIPs and invited guests gathered at Iziko Museum in Cape Town to listen to “new classics” in celebration of the 54th anniversary of Africa Day on Thursday.

After being warmed up by a few jazzy numbers played by [young musicians](#) from Kronendal Music Academy in Hout Bay, which features youngsters from the community of Imizamo Yethu informal settlement and Hangberg, the audience was moved to seats under a collection of whale casts and skeletons in Iziko’s “whale well”, for the main show.

A few jokes were made about this Jonah-esque setting before the audience was treated to a varied and moving selection of music, both ancient and brand new.

Soon no one even noticed the enormous skeletons suspended above.

The programme included world premieres of new compositions by African classical music composers Tunde Jegede, from Nigeria, and South Africa's Bongani Ndodana-Breen.

The new, challenging scores were performed enthusiastically and elegantly by the Africa Arts Ensemble Noir, a chamber orchestra of 15 players from Cape Town with soprano soloist Amanda Osorio.

The showcase of classical music infused with ancient African tradition was the culmination of a series of concerts and public dialogues presented by Africa Arts.

The series, titled Africa Connections, was aimed at fostering a new understanding of Africa and breaking down cultural paradigms about classical music.

Africa Connections has allowed audiences at a variety of venues in Cape Town engage with Jegede and Ndodana-Breen on the subject of how their African roots and the continent's classical traditions have impacted their work as modern composers.

Ndodana-Breen on Friday told the African News Agency (ANA) that the Africa Day concert was also about re-imagining how we look at African creative expression.

“We need to go beyond the stereotype of what African music is, locked in the ‘tourist curio’ realm of drums,” he said.

Soprano Osorio, who is also co-executive director of Africa Arts, said she was thrilled about the response to the organisation's collaboration with the office of the premier of the Western Cape Government and Iziko Museums.

She said: “Africa Arts was very honoured that we could enable two African premieres and commission two world premieres with talented African classical music composers, and that the audience gave such a favourable reception.”

She said the event showed that there was a hunger in Africa for classical music experiences that showcased the talent on the continent and celebrated inclusivity in the arts scene.

Ndodana-Breen added: “Africa has ancient traditions, as we saw in Tunde Jegede playing the Kora but also it has a modern artistic expression just like Europe or Asia.

“Yesterday's concert could have been a concert of new music in London or New York. It had a modern cosmopolitan but African feel to it.”