

Derek Gripper and Mike Block

Mike and Derek met for the first time one morning in 2018 in a studio in Boston. Mike had invited Derek to play a track on his album, but when Derek realized they had a whole day booked in the studio he suggested that they record an entire album. So they did. Mike had never heard any of the pieces Derek played him before, and each take on the album is a first take. Expect the same spontaneity and immediacy of music making from their rare live performances together. Cello and guitar like never before.

Derek Gripper

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.” The album created an unprecedented meeting point between the written tradition of Western classical music and the oral tradition of the West African griots.

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.” Toumani Diabaté himself asked for confirmation that it was indeed just one person playing one guitar. 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. Derek tours regularly in the USA, Canada, Britain, Europe, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Namibia, Australia, Malaysia, India and Mali.

Aside from these transcriptions Derek has created original music from his diverse influences, from Africa: Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Arvo Part, and Egberto Gismonti. Derek has also spent many years performing and recording his own translations of Bach’s violin and cello music, infusing his interpretations with his lessons from the oral traditions of Africa.

His works for string quartet, larger ensembles or installations have been performed/exhibited at The Venice Architecture Biennale, Peasmarsh Chamber Music Festival in the UK and used in films such as “Five Fingers For Marseilles.”

“Five stars... Gripper has brilliantly transferred [the kora] repertoire onto a regular six string guitar. He sees [Toumani] Diabaté as the Segovia, or indeed John Williams, of the kora, championing it as a solo instrument. And Gripper brilliantly takes it back to the guitar. He’s opening a whole new repertoire of classical guitar music... bringing African guitar into the classical mainstream.”— SIMON BROUGHTON

“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

Mike Block

Mike Block is a pioneering cello player, singer, composer and educator, passionate about cross-cultural collaboration through music, and committed to inspiring individuals and connecting communities. Acclaimed by the New York Times for his "vital rich-hued solo playing", and by Salt Lake City Desert News as "a true artist... a sight to behold", Mike Block "is one of the bravest, most intriguing musicians on the American fusion scene." (Gramophone). Mike's solo show offers a rich mixture of classical repertoire, folk music, original compositions and songs. Collaborative projects include a duo with Indian tabla player Sandeep Das, a 6-piece American/African fusion band co-led with Malian balafon player Balla Kouyate, and the Mike Block Trio, featuring Joe K. Walsh (mandolin) and Zachariah Hickman (bass). Since 2005, Mike has been a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, with which he has been featured as a cello and vocal soloist, contributed arrangements and compositions, and earned a Grammy Award in 2017 for their album Sing Me Home. Mike has been invited to perform as a concerto soloist with the Illinois Symphony, The Knights, China National Philharmonic (Beijing), Shanghai Symphony and Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, and has collaborated in performance and recordings with artists like Stevie Wonder, Bon Iver, Will.i.am, The National, The New York Philharmonic, Bobby McFerrin, Allison Krauss, Mark O'Connor, Rachel Barton Pine, Edgar Meyer, Mike Marshall, Julian Lage, and many others.

Mike is an active recording artist of original material, folk music and cross-cultural collaborations, with over a dozen albums to his name, regularly charting near the top of multiple Billboard categories, such as Classical, World, Bluegrass, and Classical Crossover. His most recent album, *Where the Soul Never Dies*, is the debut album in his duo project with Sandeep Das, acclaimed by Jazziz for its "Raw, organic, eclectic and soulful dialogue". In 2020 alone, Mike released three albums to wide acclaim, including *The Edge of Atmosphere*, an album of all original songs lauded by American Songwriter magazine as having "fantastic pop sensibilities...a truly exciting blend of world-class classical musicianship." Mike's

previous album, Guzo, was crowned a “Top of the World“ album pick by Songlines Magazine UK, and features eight original compositions, each inspired by different cultures. Step into the Void is his solo album of the complete Bach cello suites, which has “a refreshing freedom and a sense of exploration” (The Whole Note), and BBC Music Magazine remarked it had “a joyous glister that I found irresistible ... here is an original talent”. Mike also has an ongoing video project to record all of the Bach cello suites in acoustically glorious bathrooms of famous concert halls, via BachInTheBathroom.com, and takes his solo show on an annual Frank Lloyd Wright House Concert Tour.

Mike has been a contributing producer for Facebook’s Sound Collection since 2017, for which he has composed, arranged, recorded and produced around 500 recordings, ranging from Western Classical to contemporary pop, and traditional music from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. In frequent demand as an arranger, Mike has contributed arrangements for artists such as Miley Cyrus, Elton John, Bobby McFerrin, Raffi, The Knights, Parker Quartet, Angélique Kidjo, Mashrou’ Leila, and many of the world’s finest dancers as Music Director of the Vail Dance Festival, where he worked closely with Damian Woetzel. Emerging as Yo-Yo Ma’s “go-to” arranger, Mr. Ma has performed and/or recorded dozens of Mike’s arrangements on 5 continents.

As an educator, Mike is passionate about developing creativity and collaboration among performers of all ages. In 2010 he founded the Mike Block String Camp as a way to provide players of different backgrounds the opportunity to learn from a world-class faculty in a variety of styles, supporting the exploration and development of the artistic voice of each student. Mike is also the founding director of Silkroad’s Global Musician Workshop, designed to foster a community of globally-minded musicians through immersive experiences. He teaches over 600 cello students online through his Multi-Style Cello School at ArtistWorks.com and authored the book *Contemporary Cello Etudes*, published by Berklee Press. In 2012, Mike was appointed Associate Professor at the Berklee College of Music and in 2018 joined the faculty of New England Conservatory through the Contemporary Improvisation department.

As an innovator, Mike is among the first wave of cellists to adopt a strap in order to stand and move while playing, employing his patented design, The Block Strap. Mike was the first standing cellist to perform at Carnegie Hall, which The New York Times characterized as “breathless ... half dance, half dare.” In 2020, Mike founded Play For The Vote (PFTV), which organizes musical performances at polling locations across the country on Election Day, with the goal of increasing voter turnout by providing a more positive voting experience. PFTV 2020 had 1,500 musicians participate across 48 states (and D.C.), gaining national press coverage with features from the Associated Press, Scripps TV, the Boston Globe, the New York Times, NPR, and more.

Mike attended the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied cello with Richard Aaron and received the Jim Hall Prize for Undergraduate Achievement. He earned a Master's Degree from the Juilliard School, studying with Darrett Adkins and Joel Krosnick. Mike plays on a modern cello made in 2014 by Fabienne Gauchet, a Yamaha electric cello, D'Addario strings, a David Gage Realist pickup, and The Block Strap. Mike lives in Boston with his wife, fiddler Hanneke Cassel, and their young daughter.
www.MikeBlockMusic.com