An Unlikely Piano Prodigy in an African New World

By MATT STEINGLASS

LOMÉ, Togo -- It's a late spring afternoon on Rue Pasteur Baeta, a street like many others in this West African port city: a dirt road between low houses and garden walls, lined with bougainvillea and orange flame trees. Schoolgirls in tan uniforms stroll hand in hand, joking in French and Mina, the indigenous language. Scooter taxis pass in front of a green and white sign: "Clinique Biasa: Dr. Fiadjoe." From an upstairs window comes a sound exceedingly rare in Lomé. Someone is practicing classical piano. More unusual still, the pianist is good. Extremely good.

You walk into the clinic and ask a nurse who the piano player is. She disappears, motioning that she will bring him down; you try to protest, but she has already gone. You envision a grumpy, middle-aged doctor, annoyed at the interruption of his afternoon break.

A few minutes later, the nurse comes back with a big, square-shouldered kid wearing a Nike T-shirt and black knee-length basketball shorts.

"It's Beethoven," he says, when you ask what he was playing. "The Fifth Piano Concerto. The `Emperor'? You know it?"

Meet Kheli Fiadjoe, Togolese piano prodigy. Classical piano may seem like a strange and quixotic career choice for someone growing up in Lomé. But in the dizzyingly multicultural, rapidly changing society of West Africa today, just about everything seems strange and quixotic.

Kheli is 15. When he was 3, his parents, both doctors, bought a dilapidated upright piano for his older sister Akofa. By the time Kheli was 6, it had become clear that he was the one who would be using the piano. By the time he was 9, he was playing Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, and by the time he was 12, he had won a scholarship to the Brevard Music Festival in North Carolina, where, the next summer, he reached the finals of the annual piano competition. Most of
the other finalists were college students.

"My teacher didn't want me to tell anyone how old I was, because I was too young to be there," Kheli says, half-smiling. "Physically I was already pretty developed. But the camp was for teenagers, like 14 and up. So he told me, if anyone asked, to just say I was 14."

Kheli is about 5-foot-9, built like a fullback, with an easy confidence that tempts you to treat him as an adult. He can, for example, discuss a Prokofiev concerto he's working on with a complete lack of affect, as though there were nothing remarkable about a 10th-grader playing a Prokofiev concerto. But when he mentions his well-developed physique, he can't quite restrain a grin. He is, after all, 15.

In a sense, Kheli is right: by the standards of piano prodigies, he's not remarkable. Plenty of children play piano concertos at 12. At 12, Evgeny Kissin was recording Chopin with the Moscow Philharmonic. But Evgeny Kissin grew up in Russia, where there's a symphony orchestra on every city block. Kheli Fiadjoe is growing up in Togo, where there is no symphony orchestra at all.

Classical music in Togo barely exists. "There are no places where you can find CD's to buy, or sheet music," Kheli complains. "And there's no live concerts." In his own age group, he is alone in his interests. "I don't talk about classical music with other kids."

There are perhaps 10 grand and baby grand pianos in the whole country. Kheli plays on a Yamaha upright, which his parents had shipped in from Japan. The Fiadjoes saved up for three years to buy the Yamaha, and now, two years later, it's a wreck. Probably 10 percent of the keys don't work.

"The strings are broken," Kheli explains. That tends to happen when you play them five hours a day in a humid African port where the temperature routinely tops 90 degrees. New strings have to be ordered from Europe, and the only working piano tuner in the area, according to Kheli, lives in Accra, Ghana, five hours away. "He says he'll come back, but he never does," Kheli says. "The piano has gone a year without being tuned."

Listening to Kheli practice the "Emperor" Concerto and Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata on his battered Yamaha is a disconcerting experience. The melodies trill over the upper end of the keyboard, a bit out of tune yet serviceable; but in the lower end, where there's a dense cluster of nonfunctioning keys, tunes dissolve into an abstraction of thunks and pings. It's like one of those 60's avant-garde pieces for prepared piano.

"Can you imagine the notes that are missing?" I ask Kheli.

"More or less," he responds. In any case, his previous piano was worse. "When you touched it, the keys stayed down. I'm used to bad pianos."

Douglas Weeks, the chairman of piano studies at Brevard, was Kheli's instructor for his two summers in North Carolina. "I know what the instruments there are like," Weeks wrote by e-mail of the pianos in West Africa. "It is something of a miracle that Kheli would emerge as the..."
prodigy that he truly is. I have no explanation."

Much of the explanation lies with Kheli's teacher, Lucas Dosseh. Dosseh, a Togolese architect, studied piano at conservatories in Toulouse, France, and Montreal, and was long the mainstay of classical music in Lomé, running a choir and a music school. Kheli was his star pupil. But last April, the 48-year-old Dosseh was killed in a car accident.

Discussing his teacher's death, in the fluent but clunky English he picked up at Brevard, Kheli has the practiced earnestness of a star athlete. "It was very, very hard for me," he says. "But I just pray to God and see what will happen. Even that day, when I heard what happened, I tried to work again on my piano."

THERE was a time when playing classical piano in Togo might have seemed less odd. Togo used to be relatively prosperous, with a large population of European expatriates. It was originally colonized by the Germans, in 1884; England and France split it up after World War I, and the English half was later incorporated into Ghana. Since 1967, Togo has been run by General Gnassingbe Eyadema, a standard-issue pro-Western military dictator. In the 70's, President Eyadema steered clear of the socialist experiments of the neighboring Ghana and Benin, allowing Lomé to become a banking center. By the 80's, Togo was known as the Switzerland of West Africa.

That was the golden age of the tiny, French-educated Togolese upper-middle class. Kheli Fiadjoe belongs to this class, and Dosseh belonged to it at a much higher level, as I found out four days after his funeral, when I attended a memorial recital by his former students.

The recital was held at the Dossehs' expansive home in a northern district of Lomé, on a huge colonnaded second-floor terrace. President Eyadema himself had attended Dosseh's funeral; the recital was a bit more intimate, but it still drew a broad spectrum of Lomé's elite. Many of the men wore suits and ties in the 80-degree evening heat. Kheli, well-mannered to a fault, identified the guests for me.

"That's my teacher's father," Kheli said, pointing. "He used to be mayor of Lomé. And that's my teacher's uncle. He wrote the Togolese national anthem."

A large, gray-haired prelate in a long white robe, a gold necklace and a purplish skullcap moved into the crowd. "That's my teacher's other uncle," Kheli explained. "He used to be archbishop of Lomé, and now he's in the Vatican. I think he's a monsignor."

Things were running late, so I went over to Lourd Dosseh, the deceased's sister, to ask her a few questions about the family.

"Our family's interest in classical music comes through our great-grandfather, Casimir," Ms. Dosseh explained. "When the Germans arrived in Togo, he was among the first in Vogan" — one of the first towns colonized by the Germans — "to convert from paganism to Christianity. At first, people in our family studied music in order to play in church." Later they took to the music for its own sake. "Luc was the real talent. He could play classical music but infuse it with a beat,
which made young people here able to understand it."

"So he sometimes combined classical and African music?" I asked.

"No, he didn't combine," Ms. Dosseh responded, as if I had said a dirty word. "You have to understand, classical music isn't European or American. It's universal. It belongs to anyone who has a certain elevation of spirit."

Ms. Dosseh is a graduate student in philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. She first specialized in the Greeks, then worked on the German idealists, up through Hegel. And it's rather appropriate that Ms. Dosseh, who believes that Western classical music is universal, should be interested in Hegel, the great universalist. Hegel was the greatest exponent of the teleological vision of progress that would be used to justify the European colonialist enterprise: the thesis that European civilization was not culturally specific but simply more advanced than others along a single ineluctable line of development, and that colonized peoples would benefit from receiving it. This was the ideology Casimir Dosseh bought into when he converted.

So classical music, for the Dossehs, is an expression of the ideology that justifies their privileged social position. But that ideology is a dwindling colonial legacy. Ms. Dosseh herself could see the cracks in the foundation.

"Kids today, it's hard to teach them this culture," she said. "They have TV, the Internet, Pokémon. It's hard to get them interested in something like piano, which takes so much work."

Besides, things have not been going well lately for Togo's classical-music-listening class. Ten years ago, President Eyadema crushed the nascent democracy movement. The country has spent the last decade in a cycle of repression and decline. Tourism has collapsed; business and foreign aid have shifted to Togo's now democratic neighbors, Ghana and Benin. Lomé looks rather shabby these days; life is harder and harder for Togo's educated professionals. More and more emigrate, including Ms. Dosseh herself.

Eventually, the recital got started. Dosseh's 28-year-old cousin, a student at a conservatory in France, ripped through a Bach partita, all flying fingers and razzle-dazzle. Kheli played a Beethoven sonata, dark and plodding. The piano was a little rattly thing with a squeaky damper pedal. Scores of bats were wheeling out in the dark, peeping rhythmically.

Following the pianists, a grandfatherly man with a tremendous basso voice sang a Schubert song, translated into Ewe, one of the local languages. Then Edna Tounou, the principal of the International School, which Kheli attends, got up. Ms. Tounou, who is African-American, opened up with an operatic, Paul Robeson-style rendition of " Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."

Kheli Fiadjoe's own family doesn't have quite the Faulknerian grandeur of the Dossehs; they might not be well enough off to permit themselves the luxury of a musician son. In fact, they've had a bit of a dispute over the issue.

"I thank God that my mother wanted me to be a musician even if my father didn't," Kheli says.
"He wanted me to be a doctor."

Kheli's mother, Dr. Jemima Fiadjoe, is a pediatrician. She's a gracious woman with the overflowing enthusiasm of someone accustomed to handling children. When she's not working, you can often find her on the roof of the Fiadjoes' home and clinic, where they have constructed a "paillotte," the traditional straw-thatched gazebo where West African families gather to relax. Next to the paillotte is a mortar and pestle for pounding fufu, the local manioc-flour staple, and in the corner of the roof is a meditation room that Jemima Fiadjoe has set up for the local chapter of Sokka Gakkai International, the Buddhist sect to which she adheres.

"I come from an artistic family," she explains. "My brother is a painter in Paris. And even when Kheli was a tiny child, I knew: this one's an artist."

Kheli's father, Dr. Honoré Fiadjoe, is a gynecologist. He is a careful-looking man, medium height, in wire-rimmed glasses and spotless green doctor's scrubs.

"Here's what worries me," Honoré Fiadjoe says. "To be a famous pianist, you have to be the best of the best. You can be an average doctor and have a respected place in society, but if you're an average pianist, if you don't manage to win the big competitions, you end up as a professor of music in some little college, completely bitter." He doesn't think Kheli should give up the piano, but he wants him to keep his options open. "I want to make him a man who enjoys life, who is interested in what he does. That's why I say he shouldn't spend all his time banging on the piano. He should learn another profession at school, while remaining a pianist. He could be, I don't know, an interior decorator. He could decorate a house in two or three weeks, and afterward he could go play the piano for several months."

If you were worried that Honoré Fiadjoe might be driven by the stereotypical doctor's scientific machismo and disdain for the arts, then his preference that Kheli become an interior decorator should set your mind at ease. But there are other things that trouble him about sending Kheli off to a conservatory.

"A black African is naturally going to be discriminated against," he says. It sounds as though he's remembering his own experiences as a medical student in Lille. "He's an independent boy. He'll manage. But in difficult situations, where you have to handle a lot of stress, he'll be alone. If he were 30, it would be no problem, but he's 15."

Does he see himself in Kheli?

"No," he replies. "When I was 15, I was much more timid."

On Friday afternoons, the intrepid Kheli likes to play pickup soccer in a dirt field near his house. The field has no preconstructed goals; the youngsters set up stones as goalposts at either end of the field, and the height of the imaginary crossbar is based on the size of the goalie. The teams play 10-minute games, shirts against skins. One boy, his left leg shriveled by polio, lopes around blowing a whistle. He can't play, so he gets to referee.

Most of the boys play barefoot, because the only shoes they own are flip-flops. Average per capita income in Togo is about a dollar a day. For these youngsters, a CD player would be a
magnificent luxury. A piano, a summer in the United States, a university education: these are so out of the question as to be irrelevant. One is tempted to ask, how does Kheli relate his life to the lives of most Togolese teenagers?

It's not a fair question. The class gap between Kheli and a poor kid in Lomé isn't so much wider than that between a Fieldston student and a poor kid in New York. If anything, the difference is that in New York, the prep-school students are not likely to play pickup ball with the kids from Bed-Stuy.

Of course, Kheli spends more time hanging out with friends of his own class, from his old school, the Lycée Français, or his current one, the International School. But these friends aren't listening to much Beethoven either.

"I like Eminem, Snoop Doggy Dogg," says Kheli's friend Jean-Paul, as he and Kheli lounge about Jean-Paul's house watching European soccer on a 21-inch television. "And some R & B. R. Kelly is good." French rappers, like MC Solar, are O.K., too.

Kheli agrees. "I listen to rap music, Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., all those things," he says. "The kind of music that most of my friends listen to. I like everything." Kheli also likes African pop: he mentions Congolese soukous, the Nigerian reggae star Adama Dicko and Ivorian makossa.

It is extraordinarily difficult to get a sense of the constituent elements of Kheli Fiadjoe's cultural universe. Just when you think you've got a handle on it, something new comes up. At one point, I told Kheli I lived in New York.

"I was in New York for two days, on the way to Brevard," Kheli replied. "I wanted to go to Madison Square Garden, but I couldn't. I got there just when the Knicks were in the finals, against the Spurs, I think. I think it was Game 3. Have you ever been to see them?"

"No," I said. "It seems a little sad now, with Patrick Ewing gone."

"Yeah, it's a younger team now, but they're missing experience," said Kheli. "There's Larry Johnson, but he can't do everything. They should have won the title that year. That was their chance. Because Sprewell was in form, and Marcus Camby, too. And there was a third guy, Allan Houston."

Kheli then offered a dissertation on various N.B.A. players, in French, perfectly Frenchifying each name: la-RI jon-SONE, a-LAIN ee-ver-SONE, krees we-BÈRE. For the record, Kheli would be opposed to a comeback attempt by Michael Jordan. Unless, of course, he came back and won the title, which would be "the greatest."

On another occasion, Kheli asked me whether I liked poetry. I responded that I knew Russian poetry fairly well, from college.

"Do you like Pushkin?" Kheli asked.

Kheli's habit of bursting out with these weird cultural outliers reminded me of listening to him play his deteriorating Yamaha: the stretches of gorgeous melody, punctuated by thudding
lacunas. In fact, I wound up thinking about Kheli's Yamaha a lot. Its silent keys make a perfect metaphor for a certain familiar take on postcolonial Africa: the collapse of European-created infrastructures; railroads rusting and sinking; hospitals and universities emptied; states ceasing to exist in all but name.

This would be one way to look at Kheli's piano. But it misses the point. Kheli is not growing up in an increasingly isolated African backwater; Africa today is more integrated into the global infrastructure than ever. It's just not integrated in the same way. Kheli may not be able to get his piano repaired, but he can get the latest Wu Tang Clan releases. The neocolonial scholarships that sent his father to school in France may not be there for him, but he has a scholarship to go to a North Carolina music camp, which his father never would have heard of 20 years ago.

We tend to think of globalization as a unitary phenomenon, one that got started sometime around the invention of the Big Mac and that has been homogenizing the world every since. But this isn't the way it works. Classical music in Togo is a legacy of an entirely different wave of globalization, one that took place more than a century ago: European colonialism. It's that legacy that is now being undone, or rearranged, by a new form of globalization — Lourd Dosseh's three horsemen of postmodernity: satellite television, the Internet and Pokémon.

WHAT is going on in Kheli's world isn't the end of history or the homogenization of planet Earth. What's going on in Kheli's world is Tupac Shakur meeting Pushkin to a tune by Saint-Saëns, orchestrated by Salif Keita.

This is the scene: Kheli is in the living room trying to practice. His mom is up on the roof pounding manioc for the fufu while she recites Buddhist mantras. His dad is sitting in the paillotte with grandpa, reading The New England Journal of Medicine. His sister is off in France, letting her native Mina grow rusty while she pursues a master's degree in business English and Portuguese. His school principal is singing spirituals in a classical soprano, straight out of the Harlem Renaissance. His Lycée Français buddies are getting ready to go out dancing to soukous and Eurotechno at Privilege, the Lebanese-run disco. The poor boys in his neighborhood are playing barefoot soccer, calling out the names of Nigerian stars who play for top-ranked Dutch clubs. Their sisters are in the market, selling water for 4 cents a bag from trays on their heads, humming Ivorian makossa, Ghanaian gospel, local traditional Mina tunes, French hip-hop, American R & B.

What's going on in Kheli's world is a swirling, recombinant cultural mess, uncontrollable, unclassifiable and unbelievably creative. What will come out of all this? Kheli has to close the living-room doors just to hear himself think. He has to concentrate. He's working on the "Emperor" Concerto.

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