

NEWS RELEASE

UMass Amherst Fine Arts Center

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WHAT: UMass Fine Arts Center Presents
TOUMANI DIABATÉ & THE SYMMETRIC ORCHESTRA
Thursday, April 23, 7:30PM
Fine Arts Center Concert Hall
Tickets available at 545-2511 or 800-999-UMAS or online at
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Toumani Diabaté and the Symmetric Orchestra Bring Pan-African Music to the UMass Fine Arts Center Concert Hall

Amherst, Mass.—More than any other artist, Toumani Diabaté is responsible for introducing the kora—a 21-string harp unique to West Africa—to audiences around the world. On Thursday, April 23 at 7:30PM, Diabaté and his Symmetric Orchestra will be bringing their pan-African beat to the Fine Arts Center Concert Hall. There will be a pre-performance talk by Professor Olabode Omojola from 6:45 to 7:15PM in the Lobby of the Concert Hall.

Toumani Diabaté and the Symmetric Orchestra's appearance is one of the Fine Arts Center Series' "The Arts Give Back" events. The audience is urged to bring their old, extra, or unwanted cell phones. Even if they're not working, they can help women and children in need through the New England Learning Center for Women in Transition. To find out more, visit www.nelcwit.org.

Diabaté is in the vanguard of a new generation of Malian griots who are constantly looking for ways of modernizing and still honoring their traditional music. He founded and directs a music school in Bamako, where Malian children from different social backgrounds learn to play traditional instruments and dance. Many argue that music is Mali's greatest resource; Diabaté amply demonstrates this adage. Aside from being a player of exceptional virtuosity and creativity, Diabaté plays a vital role as bandleader, teacher, musical conservationist, and

composer in the capital city of Bamako, Mali, where he was born and has lived all his life.

In the early 1990s, Toumani began to gather around him a number of exceptionally talented young musicians such as the brilliant Bassekou Kouyate on the ngoni, and started cultivating a certain sound and approach to his music—with a type of jazz-jugalbandi-griot instrumental. This was a period in Mali when synthesizers, electric guitars and drum programs were all the rage, but Toumani steadfastly held out for an all-acoustic sound, finding other ways of modernizing the tradition. The result was Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, which, in recent years, has received numerous accolades for its contribution to the development of African instrumentation.

The orchestra's members come from all over, from different generations and backgrounds, and include Mali's Soumaila Kanouté, Senegal's Moussa Niang, and others from Burkina Faso and Guinea. All bring their own specific musical skills and experiences to create a joyous rhythmic explosion of pan-African music.

The idea behind the music created by the Symmetric Orchestra is to tap into the cultural heartbeat of the region, which was seen as one—the Mandé Empire—during medieval times. This sense of relatedness still resonates today. Diabaté may have been born in Mali but his father, the great kora player Sidiki Diabaté, was born in Gambia and his father before that in Mali. People from across the region may share a family name and be able to trace their roots back to the same place. The pan-African nature of this musical cross-pollination is exemplified by the Symmetric Orchestra.

Diabaté himself has earned his place as a key figure in African music overall. In 2003, he received the Tamani d'or, a prize awarded to the best kora player in the world. In 2004, he garnered the Zyriab des Virtuoses, a UNESCO prize awarded at the Mawazine Festival organized by King Mohammed VI of Morocco. Diabaté is the first black African ever to receive that prize.

The appearance of Toumani Diabaté and the Symmetric Orchestra is sponsored by Coca-Cola, Dean's Beans, The River 93.9FM, and *The Green Living Journal*.

Tickets are available from the Fine Arts Center Box Office at 413-545-2511 or 800-999-UMAS, or online at <http://www.fineartscenter.com/>. Seats are \$30, \$25, or \$15, with tickets for youth 17 and under and Five Colleges/GCC students at \$15.

On Wednesday, April 22 from 4:00 to 7:00PM on the Fine Arts Center plaza, the Fine Arts Center will be sponsoring a free Earth Day celebration. The festivities will culminate with a drum circle at 6:00PM that will include the participation of members of the Symmetric Orchestra. Participants are urged to bring their drums

and other percussion instruments; there will be a limited number of drums available for the use of the audience. Activities during the Earth Day celebration will include the presence of "Green" vendors and associations, children's programs and activities, organic farmers, and entertainment. The festival is free and open to all. Please see accompanying release.