

Saturday, February 20, 2010, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Angélique Kidjo



Jed Roper

Angélique Kidjo	<i>vocals</i>
Dominic James	<i>guitar</i>
Andre Manga	<i>bass</i>
Ibrahim Diagne	<i>percussion</i>
Daniel Freedman	<i>drums</i>
Mauel Elias	<i>tour manager</i>
Pierre Bianchi	<i>sound engineer</i>

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The explosive growth in the popularity of world music during the past several decades has broadened the boundaries of our world, reminding listeners of the vast cultural wealth and diversity in this wired age. The music of African-born songstress **Angélique Kidjo** offers another perspective: that the world is also much smaller than we think, and that no matter how far flung its peoples may be, subtle lines of interconnection span the globe, uniting its people.

Ms. Kidjo, whose work has garnered her four Grammy Award nominations, has cross-pollinated the West African traditions of her childhood in Benin with elements of American R&B, funk and jazz, as well as influences from Europe and Latin America. Throughout her career, she has collaborated with a diverse group of international artists like Carlos Santana and Gilberto Gil. Her duet with Dave Matthews on the song “Iwoya,” which appeared on her record *Black Ivory Soul*, was a critical success that helped diversify her fan base.

The daughter of an actress, dancer and theatrical producer, Angélique Kidjo was born in Quidah, a coastal city in the West African country of Benin. Growing up in the port city of Cotonou, she was exposed to a far-ranging array of music and dance. Inheriting her mother’s love of performing, Ms. Kidjo made her stage debut with her mother’s theatrical troupe. Inspired by the rock, pop and soul music of Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Miriam Makeba, James Brown and Aretha Franklin, she was singing professional by her 20th birthday. Although her first album, *Pretty*, produced by Cameroon-based vocalist Ekambi Brilliant, yielded a hit single, “Ninive,” the oppressive political environment of Benin led her to relocate to Paris in 1980, where her international career began to blossom. Initially active in the jazz community, she gradually expanded her interests and, by the 1990s, had become a major international artist.

In the course of her successful career, Ms. Kidjo has spread her rhythmic Afro-funk fusion to the four corners of the globe. With her fun-loving personality, her onstage charisma and her totally unique voice, she is certainly one of the most popular artists on the current world scene.

Over the past decade, she has used her visibility to support a far-reaching collection of advocacy

groups, from UNICEF (for whom she is a Goodwill Ambassador) to her own Batonga Foundation (providing educational aid to young African girls). In September 2009, she joined forces with UNICEF in a campaign to eliminate tetanus. A portion of proceeds for downloads of the song, “You Can Count on Me,” will provide tetanus vaccines to pregnant women and mothers. Another haunting song, “Agbalagba,” was originally penned for and offered as a free download with the *New York Times* bestselling book *Say You’re One of Them* by African writer Uwem Akpan. The book, recently featured in Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club, consists of five stories, each written from the point of view of a child in Africa. Written with her longtime collaborator Jean Hebrail in the Yoruba language, “Agbalagba” roughly translates to “the ancestors,” as the song pertains to young peoples’ responsibility to those that came before them. “I immediately felt a bond with Uwem,” says Ms. Kidjo. “The second we met, it was as if we had always known each other. I’m proud to contribute a song to his beautiful collection of stories.”

Ms. Kidjo digs into her roots—roots that reach far beyond her homeland of Benin—on her new Razor & Tie release, *OYO*. Her art roves across boundaries, genres and ethnicities, finding the connections that link musical forms from every part of the world, while still bonding closely with her own traditions. The songs on *OYO* embrace R&B, soul, jazz and Beninese melodies, as well as a trio of her own original works.

Her version of Curtis Mayfield’s “Move on Up,” which she sings in duet with multiple Grammy-winning singer John Legend, epitomizes her affection for classic R&B. Chosen, says Ms. Kidjo, “by my daughter,” the song illustrates her skill at finding both the timelessness and the contemporary qualities in a song. In 1970, Mr. Mayfield sang “Move on Up” as a rallying call to underprivileged American youth. In 2010, Ms. Kidjo and Mr. Legend, backed by a spirited chorus and riffing horns, sing “Move on Up” as a call to African youth to direct the fate of their continent.

Ms. Kidjo was delighted to have the superb guitarist and singer, Lionel Loueke—also a native of Benin—backing her on the CD. Their friendship reaches back to their youth. “His brother was

in my class,” she says. “Lionel understood exactly what I was trying to do when I told him I wanted to get into the music that influenced me as a child.”

That music—the music from her youth—is the theme of the album’s most mesmerizing tracks. Her renderings of songs by iconic American pop music figures display Ms. Kidjo’s ability to, as she says, “bring the music of Benin” into her interpretations. Carlos Santana’s “Samba Pa Ti” emerges as a captivating ballad spotlighting the trumpet of Roy Hargrove. On “Cold Sweat,” featuring members of the Afro Beat band Antibalas, the horn-heavy riffs and call and response backup singing frame a driving vocal from Ms. Kidjo that would surely have been a turn-on for James Brown.

But the closing piece she selected for the album traces to even earlier memories. Ms. Kidjo was only six years old the first time she sang in public, and the song was “Atcha Houn,” a traditional melody she describes as “a kind of parade music people sing when they gather together. I sang it at my mom’s theater company,” she recalls. “My mom had to push me onstage to do it, but that’s when my addiction to singing, and to the stage, got started.”

She has never lost her African musical connections, the linkages of which are present in several traditionally oriented pieces. The dramatic, call-like melody of “Zelie” was composed by Togo’s Bella Bellow, and sung by Ms. Kidjo with articulate

intensity. “Mbube,” associated with Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte is, says Ms. Kidjo, “the original version of ‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight,’ before it had French or English lyrics.”

Her original songs illuminate the emotional range of her creativity. She describes the spirited “Kelele” as a “High Life from Ghana,” and adds that, “Everywhere I go in the world, I want people to remember that they are human beings and to remember that if we don’t have fun, everything we do will have no taste.”

Given the stylistic range of the selections, the music for *OYO* was recorded in an remarkably short period of time. “In four days, with the help of Christian McBride on upright bass, Kendrick Scott on drums and Thiokho Diagne on percussion, we did 16 songs,” says Ms. Kidjo. “But it wasn’t hard, because I have so much music in my brain. It was there, it was dominant, it was ready to be expressed, and I urgently wanted to express it.”

And express it she did, with the same kind of charismatic life force that she expresses in her stage performances. Asked about her seemingly boundless enthusiasm, drive and creativity, Ms. Kidjo laughs and says, “Without challenges in life, we get bored. Me, I just always keep in mind what my grandmother used to say, ‘You rest when you die.’”

Don Heckman