

**A Teacher's Guide**  
**To The Performance Of**

**Oran Etkin's**  
**Group Kelenia**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

A performance by Group Kelenia offers students the chance to learn about and experience Malian music, Jewish music and jazz and how they come together to create a fresh new sound, harmoniously mixing sounds of different cultures.

It also provides a unique opportunity to illustrate basic math skills and make numbers, multiplication, division and grouping more concrete through the use of rhythm.

Science can be brought to life by exploring the various materials that the instruments are made of, discovering how their vibrations cause sounds and how the size of the vibrating membrane controls the pitch of the resulting sound!

An exploration of the various cultures behind Malian music, Jewish music and jazz can provide a springboard to explorations of various cultures and the historic events that shaped their development. Kelenia is an illustration of the intersection of these three distinct cultures with roots in three distant geographic areas. Discovering how these cultures came together in the development of Kelenia can lead to a better understanding of our diverse society in the US and of the diversity and richness of the specific community of the children in the class.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES, HISTORY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS:**

### **Exploring The Influences of Kelenia: The Role of Music As A Cohesive Force In Different Societies**

In the Malian language of Bambara, Kelenia means “love between people who are different from each other”.

The music of Group Kelenia draws on three distinct traditions. In each one, we can see the centrality of music in maintaining the cohesion of the society.

#### **Malian griots and their role in society:**

In the Malian society, there are specific families whose role it is to maintain the oral history. The first families to do this were the Kouyate and Diabate families, both of which are represented on the CD, *Kelenia*. Some griots simply tell stories about the history of the country, specific families and allegorical stories.

However, many griots also use music to tell these stories. They have found that through singing with musical accompaniment, they are able to convey their

message in a deeper way than they could simply by speaking. This has led the griot to become the keepers of a rich musical tradition as well as the keepers of the oral history of their people. They often sing directly to an audience member about that individual's family history, so their music has developed many improvisational elements akin to jazz.

### **Jewish musical traditions:**

Judaism is unique in that it is both a people and a religion. The Jewish people used to live in a land called Judea (located where modern-day Israel is now) many years ago, but were exiled by the Roman Empire. For almost two-thousand years, they were scattered throughout the world, no longer centered in any one geographical location, but still able to maintain cohesion as a people. One central force in that cohesion is the religious rituals and ceremonies, which are often accompanied by music. In the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, there developed a kind of instrumental music often referred to as klezmer. Though this music is not religious by nature, it draws much of its influence from the cantorial singing from the synagogues. The clarinet in particular became a central instrument in klezmer, because it could imitate the human voice very well. It has the ability to bend pitches and to break the sound in what are called "krechts" to imitate the cracks in the voice of the cantor in the synagogue. On Kelenia songs like "Nina" and "Yekeke," one can hear Oran Etkin's use of krechts and bends on the clarinet that are reminiscent of this sound.

### **Jazz: an American invention:**

Jazz was born near the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the African-American community in New Orleans. New Orleans was an incredibly diverse city at that time. It had been ruled by the French and the Spanish before being bought by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase. It was also a port city, resulting in its culture being influenced from contact with the Caribbean and South America. In addition, it maintained a strong connection to Native American culture. There was a vibrant culture of African-Americans, many of whom were descendents of slaves that were brought to America to work on the many plantations in the area. One of the central elements of jazz is a rhythmic propulsion often called "swing." This can be traced in many ways to the influence of music from Africa that was brought over and kept alive by these slaves and the African American culture after slavery.

In 1917, the Storyville neighborhood of New Orleans, where jazz was most frequently performed, was closed down and demolished by government officials concerned about crime. As great New Orleans musicians such as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet started leaving the city, the music known as jazz also spread from New Orleans up the Mississippi River to Chicago.

As jazz spread beyond New Orleans, it influenced and inspired people of all walks of life, who brought their own traditions to the music. For instance, in New York, musicians from the city's Latin and Jewish communities became influential

jazz artists, incorporating their own musical backgrounds into the music. Later as jazz continued to spread throughout the world, many other cultures put their mark on the music, including prominent musicians from Brazil, India, Europe and Africa.

### **African and Jewish influences in the early years of jazz:**

African music was a major influence since the inception of jazz. The slaves that were brought to the US from Africa in the years of the slave trade brought with them a rich tradition of music. Many elements of this music were passed down from generation to generation of African-Americans, including rhythms from Africa, scales such as the pentatonic scale (which developed into the “blues scale”) and even instruments, such as the West African Ngoni, which developed into the Banjo—an American invention based off an African instrument. One can find many traditional rhythms in West Africa that are strikingly similar to the rhythms of many North and South American musical styles. Jazz, blues, salsa, samba, rhythm and blues and even hip-hop all have their roots in African rhythms!

Around the turn of the century, as jazz was being born, there was a large migration of Jews from Eastern Europe escaping persecution. Many of the children of these often poor immigrants grew up to influence jazz in enormous ways. Clarinetists Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman (who was called “King of Swing” at the time) as well as composers George Gershwin and Jerome Kern were all children of Jewish immigrants. Irving Berlin was actually an immigrant himself, moving to the US from Russia at an early age. Berlin, Gershwin and Kern composed a large part of the early jazz repertoire that is often called the “Great American Songbook”. Benny Goodman was controversial in his time for leading the first major band to integrate white and black musicians, breaking social taboos of the time and advancing racial tolerance.

### **New York: a city where immigrants come together**

The group Kelenia came together in New York. Its roots lie in the music of each member’s country of origin: Mali, Israel and the US. However, the resulting music that the group plays is really a New York creation, and a reflection of a city that is made up of people from all over the world (according to the 2006 census, foreign-born individuals and their children account for 60% of New York City’s population).

Some immigrants come to New York escaping persecution or other hardships in their home countries or in pursuit of economic prosperity. As a major city, New York is seen as a place of opportunity to these communities. Musicians are especially drawn to New York for its vibrant music scene. The many jazz clubs and other venues offer a unique opportunity for musicians of vastly different backgrounds to meet and collaborate. They share their sounds, stories and food with each other and ultimately create a new kind of music reflecting this new reality that they now live in



**Questions for discussion:**

How do you learn about what came before you and the history of your society and your family? What are the different sources that our society uses to pass these down from generation to generation? How do these compare to the Malian griots' way of passing down history from generation to generation?

How many cultures are represented in your community? What kinds of music, food, clothes or rituals from these cultures are present in your community? Are some of these shared by people outside the specific culture that originated the food, music, clothing or ritual?

How does the inclusion of different musical traditions into the jazz idiom relate to the diversity of cultures in American society?

Discuss why the group Kelenia was named after the Bambara word for "love between people who are different from each other."

**Suggested Activities:**

Listen to the song "Damonzon" on the CD *Kelenia*. Explain to students that this is a song about a king who only had one eye. The king was so sensitive about only having one eye that he created a law that no one in the kingdom could say the word "one." This made it very difficult for people in the kingdom to count. What does the story mean? What's the best way to deal with something you're sensitive about? What message are the Griot trying to convey to their people through this story? What is the benefit of conveying this message through a story instead of just saying the moral of the story without the story itself? What is the benefit of inserting this story into a song?

The musicians in Kelenia hail from Mali, Israel and the US. Can you find those countries on a map?

Over the years the Jewish people have lived in places like the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Spain and the United States. Can you identify those regions on a map? How can you research the history of the Jewish people? What are some of their customs, foods and holidays?

Mali is one country in West Africa. What other countries make up West Africa? Many of these countries, including Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Togo and Benin were formerly French colonies. Can you find France on the map?

In addition to French, many languages are spoken in these countries. Can you research what some of them are? What are some of the customs, foods and clothes found in the region?

# TEAMWORK AND LISTENING SKILLS:

## **Music Composition and Improvisation:**

In many traditions, such as in classical music, a piece of music is composed prior to being played and then it is performed as close to the way that the composer intended it to sound, down to the tiniest details. In jazz and African music, however, there is a large element of improvisation built into almost every piece of music. This means that the composition is often a short musical theme, and beyond that, each musician gets to contribute his own interpretation of that theme and then make up a whole new melody that was not written or rehearsed by anyone before that moment. That melody relates to the theme of the song, but it really reflects how that individual is feeling at that moment. It reflects the musician's background, their personality, their influences and their life experiences, as well as what is happening in the room at that specific moment in time. Each time an improviser makes up a melody, even if it is on the same pre-composed theme, it will sound completely different, because the improvisation reflects how the person is feeling in that moment in time.

Group Kelenia's compositions come from three sources:

- Traditional West African songs
- Jazz compositions by jazz masters
- Original compositions by Oran Etkin

However, no matter which source the composition comes from, there is still a lot of room for improvisation and for each person to express his own feelings at that moment.

When improvising with other musicians, each member of the group must listen to each other. Making music is a team effort. When one member plays faster or slower or louder or softer, the rest of the group must react and play accordingly. At times, one musician may be playing more prominently, and the others are supporting him, while at other times the musicians are interacting on a very equal, fully conversational level.

## ***Suggested Activities:***

Listen to the song "Nina" on the CD *Kelenia*. The short melodic theme is a melody from the traditional repertoire of Mali, but the way that they play the song reflects each individual in the band. Can you hear influences of Jewish music, jazz and African music in the way they play and improvise on this track?

Listen to the song "I Don't Mean A Thing" on the CD *Kelenia*. Compare it to the Duke Ellington original (which can be found on YouTube and in many library music collections). What makes Kelenia's version different? Can you detect the

African and Jewish influence? How does the balafon and percussion change the tone and sound?

Listen to the song “Yekeke” on the CD *Kelenia*. From 1:10 until 2:30, there is a section of improvised melodies in which the clarinet and balafon “talk to each other”, improvising short melodies back and forth while the bass and calabash accompany them with a supporting groove. Which instruments are improvising most overtly? Which instruments are playing a supporting role in this section? Are the clarinet and balafon interacting with each other? Can you hear that they are listening to each other and would have played something different if the other musician was playing differently?

***Questions For Discussion:***

What things in your daily life are improvised? What things do you do the same way every day? What role does teamwork play in your school and everyday life? When you are in a group working on a project, how are you impacted by what other people in the group do?

## **SCIENCE:**

### **The Science of Sound**

Each musician in Kelenia plays an instrument that creates sound from materials found in nature. Sound is created on these instruments by the vibration of a piece of wood, string, reed or animal skin that is caused to vibrate by plucking, hitting, or blowing wind. In each case, the smaller the vibrating object is, the higher the pitch and the larger it is, the lower the pitch.

Saxophone, Clarinet & Bass-Clarinet: Both saxophones and clarinets use reeds made from Giant Cane, a form of grass. The vibrations made by the reed create the sounds. The notes are made when the player covers the holes and controls how much of the air goes through before escaping. The lowest (or deepest) notes are heard when all the holes are covered.

While the saxophone, clarinet and bass-clarinet all have reeds made from cane, the bodies are made of different materials. The clarinet and bass-clarinet are made of wood, while the saxophone is made of metal. The bass-clarinet is simply a larger clarinet that plays one octave lower because of its size.

*The saxophone, clarinet, and bass-clarinet:*



*Oran Etkin holding the big bass-clarinet*



Balafon: An instrument similar to the xylophone made out of many pieces of wood with hollowed gourds as resonators. It is played by striking two padded sticks against the wood. Different notes are heard depending on which piece of wood is hit, with the smaller pieces producing the higher sounds and the larger pieces producing lower sounds.

*Balla Kouyate playing the balafon  
Can you see the little gourds used for resonance?*



Bass: A large hollow wooden body with strings. The pitch is changed when the player moves his/her finger, altering how much of the string vibrates. If a smaller amount of the string is allowed to vibrate, the pitch is higher.

*Joe Sanders playing the big bass!*



Djembe: A goatskin-covered hand drum. The player creates different notes by altering how they hit the skin with their hands.

Calabash: A drum made from a hollowed, dried gourd. Different ways of hitting the calabash produce different sounds.

*Makane Kouyate playing the calabash.  
The djembe is by his side.*



*The djembe, balafon, bass, clarinet, saxophone and bass-clarinet:*



**Suggested Activities:**

Have students identify each instrument's sound.

Discuss how natural materials are used to create the instruments.

What other common objects are made from wood and animal skin?

Have students create their own reed instruments by blowing between two blades of grass or two pieces of paper. Students can create "straw saxophones" with plastic straws. Cut one end so that it is pointy. Blow into the pointy end and the air inside the straw will cause vibrations that result in sound.

Have students create a simple stringed instrument by placing a rubber band around an open shoe-box or other type of box. Squeeze the rubber band in different places with one hand and pluck with the other. Notice how the pitch changes as a different amount of the rubber band is allowed to vibrate.

## MATHEMATICS:

***Math In Music (groupings, multiplication, division and fractions in rhythm):***

The music of Group Kelenia is based on West African rhythms, which can be broken down into groupings of two and three beats. This offers an opportunity to make the abstract concept of numbers become more concrete, enabling children to really feel the difference between the concept of two and the concept of three. For older children, it can also offer an opportunity to discuss the concepts of multiplication, division and fractions in a musical context:

Bellow are several activities that can be done with children to internalize these concepts. The activities are organized by level of complexity.

**Math Activity 1: Feeling two and three**

Numbers are abstract concepts that can be made more tangible through the use of rhythm.

*Two drumming:* Take two drums, a large one that makes a deeper sound and a smaller drum. Play the big drum when you say "one" and play the smaller drum when you say "two". Alternate between the two in a steady beat, saying "one, two, one, two," etc. Let each child try playing the drums in this manner while the class counts with them.

*Two movement:* Stomp a foot while saying “one”, clap your hands while saying “two” and continue in a steady rhythm. The whole class can do this together.

*Three drumming:* Show the two drums that were used for the “two drumming” exercise and ask the questions: “How many drums do we have? Well, we want to have three drums. How many more drums do we need?” When the students reply “one drum,” add one more small drum, so now there is one big drum and two small drums. Hit each one with a steady tempo while counting “One, two, three, one, two, three, etc.” with the big drum always “one”.

*Three movement:* Count together “One, two, three, one, two, three, etc.” Stomp your foot on one and clap on two and three.

## **Math Activity 2: Multiplication, Division and Grouping**

Now try doing *Two Movement* and *Three Movement*, but this time alternating the foot that is stomped. In this way, we are essentially multiplying our original movement exercise by two, since it is done once on each foot. We can see that two times two is now four. Three times two is now six.

Many African rhythms are based on this six feel that we just experienced. In the exercise above, these six beats were derived from two groups of three beats (one group of three beats in one foot-stomp and two claps, another group when the other foot-stomps followed by two claps).

We can divide six beats into two groups of three or three groups of two:

*Two groups of three beats:*



*Three groups of two beats:*



This is demonstrated quite clearly in the Leonard Bernstein composition “I Want To Be In America” from the musical *West Side Story*. At first there are two groups of three in which each syllable gets one beat of musical time: “I want to” and “be in A-”. Then there are two groups of two beats, in which each syllable gets two beats of musical time: “-me-ri-ca”.

African music also employs many poly-rhythms, which means multiple rhythms happening at once. In fact, it is not uncommon for one instrument to be dividing the 6-feel into two groups of three and another instrument to divide the same six

beats into three groups of two simultaneously! This can be demonstrated by the group Kelenia at the performance.

***Additional Related Activities:***

Originally “It Don’t Mean a Thing” was recorded by Duke Ellington to be in a 4 feel, but Kelenia plays it in 6. Listen to the original Duke Ellington version and the Kelenia version. Can you hear the difference?

The song “Kelnia” changes its feel from 4 to 6 at 4:20 in the recording – can the students sense the difference in the rhythm?

Listen to a recording of “I Want To Be In America” from the musical West Side Story by Leonard Bernstein. Clap along to every beat and sing the refrain (“I want to be in America”). Can you feel the alternation between the two ways of grouping the 6 beats described above?

**Glossary:**

Balafon: A West African instrument, similar to a xylophone, made out of wood and played with sticks.

Bambara: A language spoken in Mali in West Africa.

Clarinet: A single-reed wind instrument.

Griot: Keepers of oral traditions in West Africa.

Improvisation: When musicians create impromptu sounds rather than simple playing pre-composed music.

Jazz: A form of music in which musicians improvise over swing rhythms.

Klezmer: Traditional Jewish music, often played at weddings and other celebrations.

Measure: A segment of time in music.

Saxophone: A single-reed wind instrument.

## Other Resources:

### Books:

Seymour, Gene. *Jazz :The Great American Art*. A guide to jazz for young people.

Eyre, Banning. *In Griot Time* A look at the West African griot tradition through the lens of an American guitarist.

### Web sites:

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/>

Jazz history articles and lesson plans for grades 5-8 and 9-12.

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/>

Lesson plans and activities based on the PBS “Jazz” series.

<http://www.afropop.org>

Articles and resources relating to African music

### YouTube:

Recording of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Klezmer clarinetist Naftule Brandwein. The clarinet laughs and sobs like a human voice:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3pdAWWnsuw>

1943 Film of Duke Ellington And His Orchestra playing “It Don’t Mean A Thing”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDQpZT3GhDg>

A 22 year old and a 5 year old practice playing the balafon together in Burkina Faso. Other children watch and dance:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IW3rTJ0gO0>

Oran Etkin’s Group Kelenia perform with guest Griot singer Abdoulaye Diabate. He is singing about why brothers should not fight with each other:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5bkvx6ubbQ>