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Prince Diabate a Masterful Kora Player

By DON HECKMAN, Special to The Times

Guinean musician Prince Diabate has been described as the prince (as in royalty, not the rock star) of the kora, as well as the Jimi Hendrix of the instrument. In his performance at the Getty Center's Harold M. Williams Auditorium on Saturday, the former description was more applicable than the latter.

The colorfully garbed instrumentalist and singer, a descendant of a long line of Malinke djelis, is clearly a masterful kora player with the capacity to extract an astonishing array of sounds and melodies from his utterly unique instrument. The kora combines elements of the harp and the lute, and in Diabate's hands it was especially effective when he was using its multi-stringed sounds to accompany his singing of spirited traditional songs.

The Hendrix label was less apparent. True, Diabate had his kora hooked up through some electronic amplification and sound control devices that allowed him to create some wah-wah effects. It was fascinating to hear the full range of the soft, acoustic sounds of the kora via the amplification, but the electronic manipulation added little more than superficial references to rock guitar sounds--utterly unnecessary for Diabate's playing, which was powerful and engaging on its own terms.

There was, in addition, an extraordinary sense of celebration about the performance, with the six musicians backing Diabate--especially Famoro Diabate on the xylophone-like balafon and Aziz Faye on percussion--providing a galvanizing musical surge, and Rujeko Masango adding some wildly energetic dancing. By the time the concert reached its spirited climax, the stage was filled with audience members working out their own dance steps, and Diabate and his players were surrounded by fluttering dollar bills offered, in traditional African style, by appreciative listeners.