# Courage in the Congo

In central Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, an orchestra and women's chamber ensemble have flourished against all the odds. Jessica Jane Hart tells their inspiring story

On a Monday morning at a church in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angel Tsimika struggles to project her breath into her flute mouthpiece. Standing in front of her, her teacher speaks with a firm voice in a language that Angel doesn't understand. It's hot, and both of the women are exhausted. Angel wipes the sweat from her brow and rests her head on her flute as a young man translates the words of the teacher from English to Lingala. She makes another attempt as her teacher watches pensively. Words seem to be failing them; English is not the native tongue of anyone in the room, so the lesson stops and starts. Suddenly, her teacher drops to the floor and has Angel join her in a yoga style pose, sitting with legs raised in front of them and their flutes to their lips. The muscles in Angel's diaphragm are forced to contract, and suddenly the concept is clear. She chuckles, and shakes her head at the silly position it took to get there. Her teacher laughs and they return to the music that they've been working on for weeks.

> "Kinshasa is a place filled with action and intensity, bombarding the senses of sight, sound and smell"

Angel is part of the Kimbanguist Symphony Orchestra, a community of self-taught musicians who gather in a church to rehearse Beethoven, Brahms and more, and her teacher is Kaori Fujii, a renowned Japanese flautist.

The Democratic Republic of Congo and Beethoven's Fifth might seem the most unlikely bedfellows, but musicians like Angel have been working hard to change that. The Kimbanguist Symphony Orchestra is a dedicated group that has been gathering in their church for the past 20 years to develop their skills and realise their dreams of performing music to a wide audience.

Outside the church, Kinshasa can be overwhelming. Much of its housing is low-level with nearly 12 million people living and sleeping at ground level. Scrambling and hustling under the hot sun, people walk with heavy loads

**Streets ahead: (this page, clockwise from main) cellist Josephine Nsimba plays in a Kinshasa road; Nsimba and members of the women's ensemble share a mid-rehearsal meal; Japanese flautist Kaori Fujii leads an ensemble rehearsal**

JESSICA JANE HART

balanced on their heads; some are pushing carts or hanging on the backs of cars. At night, the vibrancy of the city is masked by an intense darkness that blankets the streets. Electricity and running water are not always guaranteed, so while the streets remain busy, pedestrians in the darkness seem to come out of nowhere, like deer on a country road. Drifts of plastic rubbish fill the drainage canals that line the streets while other waste is piled up and burned where it lies. It's a place filled with action and intensity, bombarding senses of sight, sound and smell.

Many of the Kimbanguist Symphony Orchestra's musicians travel long distances on foot or by bus to attend rehearsals or to have practice time on an instrument. When rains flood the city's dirt roads, it can be difficult to travel, but the group has attracted attention with their accomplishments, performing abroad and capturing the attention of international media.

And in fact, it was a German documentary that first drew Kaori Fujii's attention to the orchestra back in 2011. 'I always thought that in order to be a classical musician you have to have really good training, you have to have family support, a good instrument, a humidity-controlled room and all of those things I thought were normal,' recalls Fujii. 'These people didn't seem to have any of that, yet they were still doing it.'

After meeting the orchestra's musicians, Fujii refocused her career to spend time helping them develop, and now travels to Kinshasa several times a year to work with the musicians, giving masterclasses and facilitating concerts and outreach programmes. In 2014 she founded Music Beyond, a non-profit organisation dedicated to music education in developing countries, focusing on DR Congo – and in 2016 she worked with the women of the orchestra to form DR Congo's first all-female chamber ensemble (as yet unnamed), providing a platform for the women to act as role models in communities throughout the country.

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That the ensemble exists at all is something of a miracle. Twenty years ago, the main orchestra had very few instruments, which they had to share. And with no access to basic accessories like strings or hardware for repairs, they were forced to use mechanical wire in place of strings and random wood or plastic pieces for missing or broken parts. Fujii remembers her first rehearsals with the woodwind players. 'They were using some crazy fingerings to get the notes.' Many of them had been improvised by mimicking an old Casio keyboard. 'So they would just play a note dum-dum-dum-dum-dum and then they would try different combinations with their fingers to find something that resembled it and write it down. They'd do that for every single note. That piece of paper was passed down to their students, because nobody had books.'

Today is a different picture – more instruments and kit have been donated, though they continue to rely on creative problem-solving for repairs and parts replacements. And music has helped with their confidence, too. 'The women of the orchestra were really lethargic, which is to say in a deep sleep before Kaori came and woke us up,' says Dauphine, a violinist in the ensemble. 'She is showing us the potential that is within us, but that we were not nurturing.'

Now the women's ensemble is starting to perform more – at schools and skill centres for struggling communities throughout DR Congo. After concerts they spend time with the audience, listening to stories about the struggles that each community faces. Speaking the local language, Lingala, the musicians share personal stories of hope. 'We struggled to find basic supplies, but we persisted because we had a vision,' says violinist Pauleth Masamba. 'We started with nothing – no musicians, no instruments – and we built it up, step by step, like a kid building a house.' Fellow violinist Nicole Tuzolana chips in: 'If you don't put love into whatever you are doing, it's not going to go anywhere; you must suffer to make something good.'

**Work and play: (clockwise from bottom far left) double bassist Edgar Mbidimambu teaches a young Kimbanguist Symphony Orchestra player; members of the women's ensemble outside the church where they practise; flautist Angel Tsimika rests during a lesson; violinist Dauphine Mata takes a break between rehearsals; violinist Pauleth Masamba says goodbye to Fujii after a long day of music-making**

Fujii talks about the first outreach programme at a centre outside of Kinshasa where young mothers, (some as young as 12 years) and homeless girls live together. 'I asked some of the ladies of the ensemble to share personal stories of how they overcame their hardships, and I was amazed by the fact that these women really stepped up and were open about their own lives. They talked about how important it was to keep on going and to have something to love. No matter how many jobs they have to have to survive, they would never give up on music.'

The outreach projects have given new direction to Music Beyond, and Fujii says that her work in the Congo is far from finished. She has ambitions to bring instrument technicians to train up repairers and would also like to bring in more high-level teachers to give masterclasses for other instruments in the orchestra.

In turn, the ensemble has dreams of being recognised on a global stage alongside other international ensembles, and Fujii is helping them reach their goal. Recognising that much of her success is owed to the skilled teachers who pushed and challenged her, she is happy to return the favour. Asked why she makes the long and expensive journey several times a year to work in such a difficult environment, Fujii has a simple answer: 'Because they deserve it.'

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