

The Story of the Score: Black Panther

Capturing the cultural zeitgeist at the time, Black Panther was released in 2018 to critical and commercial success. It tells the story of T'Challa's struggle to stay in control of the Wakandan Kingdom as he faces ruthless opposition from his cousin, Killmonger.

Ludwig Göransson is a Swedish thirtysomething with a catchy fashion sense and Jesus-esque hair. After bonding with wannabe director Ryan Coogler over niche Swedish bands, the pair became friends. About a decade later, Coogler got the directing gig for *Black Panther* and asked Göransson to score for him. Being a white Swede, Göransson recognised he was an odd choice for a film centred dominantly around elements of both African-American and African culture. This was a core motivation in his decision to visit Senegal.

According to the comics, Wakanda was never colonised. For this reason, it is unlikely it would have been influenced by the typical Western orchestral music we hear in most Marvel movies – think [“The Avengers”](#) by Alan Silvestri. However, at the same time, *Black Panther* is a Marvel movie. Göransson wanted to achieve a balance between traditional music from the regions in and around Senegal, and Western orchestral influences. It all starts with a man called Baaba Maal.

Maal is a well-known Senegalese singer born in Podor, the northernmost town of Senegal. Göransson attended a few of Maal's concerts, with one in particular standing out. It was the early hours of the morning and the crowd was teeming. The air was thick with anticipation as every person in the crowd stirred with excitement. Eventually, Maal stepped out onto the stage and began singing. Göransson described the moment as [“a sort of religious experience”](#) and compared it to coming out of a coma. Medical accuracy aside, Göransson felt a sense of awakening – a sense of arrival. With sweeping vocals, both chilling and serene, this sense of new beginnings is evident in the piece *“Wakanda”*. Maal, who performs the vocals in the Fula language, sings about the leader of an elephant herd being replaced. In warning against replacing the elephant too hastily, the tale skilfully mirrors the dynastic themes of the film.

Nestled within this trip was not just work with Maal. Göransson encountered many griots – West African musicians and historians who maintain their oral and musical traditions. For [“Killmonger”](#) (the antagonist's theme), Göransson worked with Fula flute player, Amadou Ba. Floating somewhere around on Göransson's twitter feed is a [minute-long video](#) which captures an interesting moment between the two of them. The video opens with Göransson explaining to Ba what he's looking for. Göransson asks Ba to play softly and quietly to begin with, and then leap into something more high-pitched. Ba starts off with a gentle melody, almost tender. This lasts for a few moments before the playing ascends into a frenzy. The pitch is high and the melody is striking. Ba even screams the name “Killmonger” down the flute. It is a striking allusion to the ruthlessness of the character and his cut-throat approach to his goal, the overthrowing of T'Challa as ruler of Wakanda.

The dynamic between Killmonger and T'Challa is further embodied in their respective musical themes, speaking to Göransson's eye for detail. Each contain a series of layers that allude to a particular aspect of the characters. Both make use of an instrument traditional to the regions in and around Senegal. For Killmonger's theme, it's the Fula flute. For T'Challa's, it's the tama, or ‘talking drum’ (prominently featuring the tama soloist, Massamba Diop) and both also contain a symbol of their royal heritage – namely the use of brass, an instrument group that traditionally signifies royalty in Western music. Similarly, there are more modern elements in the themes. In Killmonger's case, you can hear a trap beat that hints to Killmonger's upbringing in Oakland, CA – a city influenced greatly by the hip-hop movement (and, interestingly, the founding city of The Black Panther Party). In T'Challa's case, Göransson used 808s (synthesised deep bass beats) to highlight the technologically advanced nature of Wakanda.

Ultimately, there's plenty more that could be said. Göransson met with kora players (the kora being a 21 stringed harp-like instrument), a 40-piece Black choir, sabar drum players (such as Magatte Sow) and so

many more griots. But crucially, the score tells us a lot about the merits of research and balance. Göransson understood the various thematic elements of the film and communicated them in his score. In balancing the standard Marvel musical tropes with more traditional West African instrumentalisation, his score was a richer interpretation of both the characters and the story.

However, we should end with a consideration of the following. In 2019, Göransson won the Oscar (Best Original Score) for *Black Panther*. You can watch his [acceptance speech on YouTube](#) where he thanks, amongst others, Diop, Maal, Sow, and 'African Artists'. This feels a little incomplete. Does this nod of acknowledgement really paint an accurate picture of the score's creation? Indeed, I had to trawl through a web of articles in order to collate this information. To an extent, this makes sense: Göransson was the one Coogler asked. It was him who reportedly put together a score for a four-hour cut of the movie. But it was also a product of so many other musicians. Though it may not be Göransson's explicit fault (in fact, when the score was performed live, Göransson insisted on using the same griots as in the recordings), surely there is more space for due credit. After all, the media never failed to mention the 'authenticity' of Göransson's score, yet they often stopped short at crediting the people behind this authenticity.