Steven Cornelius taps his feet to the drumbeat that he and three students are whipping up. His eyes are fixed on 10 student dancers flailing their arms and legs in wide, fan-like motions, as if they’d suddenly lost their skeletons.

One student, cheeks flushed from the dance, asks Cornelius, a College of Fine Arts visiting associate professor of musicology, for a suggestion to help her remember the complicated moves to kuku, the Ghanaian dance they are learning.

“Talea is our main memory device,” Cornelius says, referring to his daughter, who helps with dance instruction. “Think of me as an external hard drive,” says Talea Cornelius (SSW’12) without missing a step.

Steven Cornelius and Lamine Touré, a Senegalese drummer and an artist-in-residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, are teaching CFA’s World Music Ensemble class, which welcomes students of all backgrounds to drum, dance, and shed any semblance of self-consciousness. “Embarrassment is not allowed in this class,” Cornelius says. “We all support each other and that frees us to try these new things. People who have never danced in public or only behind closed doors are suddenly doing all these African dances on stage.”

Touré teaches Senegalese drumming and dancing during the first half of the three-hour class, and in the second half Cornelius covers Ghanaian rhythms and moves. “In the West, so often we’re trained to play what we see on a page,” says Cornelius, who had previous incarnations as a rock drummer and an orchestral musician. He became enamored of African music years ago after stumbling across Afro-Cuban street drummers in New York City, an experience that influenced his UCLA dissertation topic and later led him to Ghana—10 times. “Everything Lamine teaches,” Cornelius says, “he teaches by rote.” Everyone is a student when Touré leads, including the BU prof: “I may have a PhD, but he is a master.”

On one Tuesday night, more than a dozen students grip sabaras, typical Senegalese drums, with their knees and fix their eyes on Touré’s hands, which flutter over his drumhead like crazed hummingbirds. He rips off a rhythm, injecting a chant in his native language of Wolof, and students mimic the beat. After several weeks, they’re beginning to hold their own. Soon it’s time to dance.

Touré takes a position toward the front as students remove their shoes and socks. The lanky instructor launches into a high-stepping, arm-whirling move that, Medusa-like, shakes loose his long dreads. It’s a routine students have practiced before, but it takes several minutes before limbs loosen enough to mimic the human Gumby before them. “Ché!” (or, “I’m good!” in Wolof) shouts one student when they nail the last move. Another responds, “Wow, wow!” (Wolof for “Yes, yes!”). Touré smiles broadly, “Wow, wow?” LF

Drums Talk, Hearts Dance

CFA class explores Senegalese and Ghanaian music

WEB EXTRA Watch a video about the CFA African drumming and dancing class at bu.edu/bostonia.

Lamine Touré, a Senegalese drummer and an artist-in-residence at MIT, teaching CFA’s World Music Ensemble class.