

*The Traditional in the Contemporary*

Ninety years of Japanese compositions informed by traditional techniques  
and sensibilities.

Sept. 16, Orvis Hall Recital, 7:30 PM

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel: Shakuhachi

Mika Kimula: Voice

Hidejirō Honjō: Shamisen

With piano accompaniment by Mari Yoshihara

Program:

- *Uguisu* (vocal solo)
  - *Kakurin* (shakuhachi solo)
  - *Neo ~for Shamisen* (shamisen solo)
  - *The Rain at Jōgashima Island* (voice, piano and shakuhachi)
  - *Rikugien* (voice and shamisen)
- Intermission
- *Tears of Heaven* (shakuhachi and piano)
  - *Sanjuan-sama no Uta* (voice, shamisen & shakuhachi)
  - *Shi-te-ten* from *Three Songs from Medieval Japan* (voice, piano and shakuhachi)

Piece explanations:

***Uguisu*** "The Nightingale" (1944) Lyrics: Haruo Satō, Music: Fumio Hayasaka

This a cappella piece for voice is from the song collection, *Four Unaccompanied Songs Set to the Poetry of Haruo Satō*. The idea of musical fullness through minimalism is an important aspect of Japanese musical aesthetics, and in this piece a simple melody line deftly creates a whole universe. Fumio Hayasaka was well-known for his scoring of such Akira Kurosawa's movies as *The Seven Samurai* and *Rashōmon*. In *Uguisu*, he skillfully incorporated Japanese traditional musical ideas and vocal techniques.

*I listen to the nightingale on the day I don't see you, I listen to it singing between the sounds of the waves all day long, the nightingale, the nightingale, the nightingale...*

***Kakurin***, Hirose Ryohei (1973)

*Kakurin* ("crane forest"), a shakuhachi solo in six movements, was commissioned by the late shakuhachi master and living National Treasure Hōzan Yamamoto for his recital in 1973. Hirose's compositions during this period reflect his deep interest in Buddhism, and he especially considered the shakuhachi as a superb vehicle for expressing the essence of the spiritual beliefs of the Japanese. All of the shakuhachi pieces he wrote during this period reflect a profound Buddhist influence.

When the Buddha died and entered Nirvana under the Sara tree in Kusinagara (India), it was said the sadness caused all the trees in the area to wither and the leaves turned ashen white, resembling the feathers of a crane. This legend was transmitted to Japan, and the idea of a “forest of cranes” became an expression of sorrow.

*Neo ~for Shamisen*, Dai Fujikura (2014)

*Neo* refers to the knotted cords that hold the strings in place at the base of the *shamisen*. Fujikura, whose compositions are almost entirely for western instruments, admits that his main impression of Japanese music was “the cliché music we hear in Japanese restaurants outside of Japan, or what we see on New Year’s Day television programs in Japan.” Nonetheless, when Hidejirō Honjō commissioned this work, Fujikura “realized that I needed to do extensive research to be able to write for the *shamisen*. I worked closely with Hidejirō, and we exchanged ideas through numerous Skype sessions as well as emails, with me sending him portions of written music and then listening to his recordings.”

The result is a fast-paced, technically challenging piece in which the listener is awed by a cascade of rapid passages with tonal distortions and non-musical sounds. Fujikura compares this distortion to that of an electric guitar solo. His advice to the audience upon hearing it for the first time: “I hope you are cheering and screaming when he finishes this piece, just like you would in a rock concert.”

*The Rain at Jōgashima Island*: Kunihiko Hashimoto, lyrics by Hakushū Kitahara (1928)

This is a departing song for a fisherman leaving Jōgashima Island, (located on the Miura Peninsula south of Tokyo) early on a winter’s morning. The lyrics describe the gray rain falling on the rocky shores and also the tears falling in the heart of the one left behind. Mid-way through, the lyrics change into the boatman's rowing song as the tempo picks up, but the song ends on a note of sadness.

In the original score, Hashimoto noted that instead of a flute or violin, a shakuhachi could add a special flavor to the piece on the obbligato part. This is one of the first examples of a western-trained Japanese composer who utilized a traditional Japanese instrument in Japanese art music.

*The rain is falling on the shores of Jōgashima Island,*

*A grayish rain falls.*

*Are these dewdrops pearls?*

*Are they the dawn’s mist?*

*Or are they my tears?*

*The boat, with my beloved on board,*

*Pulls away from its mooring,*

*Its sails wetted in the rain.*

*The boatman sings:*

*-Eh! The boat is led by the oar*

*The oar is led by a song,*

*And the song is led by the boatman’s hearty spirit!*

*The rain continues; the light grows dim.*

*The boat recedes further and further;  
Its sails slowly disappearing.*

**Rikugien** (from “In the Gardens of Japan,” by Kenny Fries), Kumiko Takahashi (2016)

In 2002, Kenny Fries wrote a song cycle of eight haiku-like poems centering on his experiences in some of Japan’s most famous gardens. He wanted these songs to be performed by Mika Kimula and accompanied by Japanese instruments. His other condition was that they be set to music by a female Japanese composer. *Rikugien* (a garden in Tokyo) is the seventh of the songs to be set to music, and tonight is the world premier.

Kimula makes the following comment about the process of setting Fries’ poetry to music. “Contrary to what people may think, it is not easy for Japanese composers to write music for Japanese instruments since they mostly receive training only in Western music. Furthermore, female composers seriously composing for Japanese instruments were still rare in 2002. When I first met Kumiko Takahashi, she was just turning her ear and career from composing Western music to experimenting with Japanese music. She made a rule to herself to write only for the instruments that she could actually play. As a result, she studied as many Japanese instruments as possible so she could write for them.

“The poet describes the garden landscapes as he saunters through the venue: the readers are guided by his words to each object or focal point, one by one, that provide an integral image of the garden. In this composition, the voice acts as a kind of speech formation that introduces the listeners to the scenery, while the virtuosic *shamisen* part provides a literal sound-scape.”

Takimi no Cha-ya, Rikugien

*In an arbor by a stream: a sheltered  
bench reached by stones. Listen. The water*

*falls, and falls again, passes  
under the arched bridge into the wider*

*pond, through the small turtle-shaped  
island. From a shaded corner: an entire world.*

**Tears of Heaven:** Michael Reimann (1988)

This piece was commissioned by Blasdel in the summer of 1988 when Reimann, a German-based pianist and composer, travelled to Tokyo to study shakuhachi with Blasdel. “Tears of Heaven” refers to the rain, and this piece is a tone-poem of a summer thunderstorm. On ominous opening suggests the build of clouds. Suddenly, thunder and lightening rend the skies and the rain begins and builds in intensity. But soon enough, the rain slowly dies out. Sunshine peeks through the clouds as the last raindrops plunk onto the earth.

Due to their vast structural differences and technical abilities, the shakuhachi and piano are an unlikely and difficult combination. This piece exhibits how the power of the

shakuhachi tones can be juxtaposed with the rich sonorities of the piano.

*Sanjuan sama no Uta*, Kumiko Takahashi (2015)

This piece is part of a serial project by Takahashi entitled *Orasho Kō* (“A Study of Orasho”) and consists of songs from old hymns orally transmitted by the hidden Japanese Christians of Yamada Village, Ikitsuki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture. The composer describes this project as follows:

“The *Orasho Kō* series project was inspired by the singer Mika Kimula, who observed how the *orasho* were a kind of hybrid song between Japan and the West and how they offered clues on ways to set living, modern Japanese speech to contemporary music.

“The Orasho tradition that was handed down by the Japanese hidden Christians (known as *kakure kirishitan*) originated from the Latin Christian prayers called ‘oratio.’ The teaching of the Catholic religion was prohibited in the Edo period (1602-1868), and these prayers were secretly handed down via oral transmission. However, throughout the years they eventually transformed into to a more Japanese-like song.

“However, the two songs I cited for this piece, ‘San Juan-sama no Uta’ and ‘Igoku-sama no Uta’ didn’t originate from old Latin. Instead, they were created by the Japanese Christian villagers themselves.”

“The beginning of this song contains a phrase from another *orasho* entitled ‘Gururiyoza’, which is a transliteration into Japanese of ‘O gloriosa Domina,’ an old hymn sung in Spain around the 16th century. Next comes the phrase ‘San Juan-sama no Uta.’ Its melody is clearly marked by Japanese characteristics and set to the original Japanese text. I conformed the music idioms to various styles of Japanese music from the contemporary times back to older times, but I also deformed the music at places as well. This transition, or change of musical styles, is the main focus of this project.”

Concerning the lyrics, the Kimula adds that “the text for this piece is based on the original *orasho*, ‘San Juan-sama no Uta’ that describes the martyred death of the persecuted Japanese Christians cornered by their adversaries at the island’s edge: ‘...before us is the tide of the sea, behind us is the cliff so high...’ In spite of impending death, they confirm their faith to God and sing, ‘Let’s go to paradise where we will see the cherries blossoming in the coming spring! (*Maerō ya nah...! Mata kuru haru wa tsubomi hirakuru hana de aru zo ya*).

“The composer playfully experiments with various singing styles, syllables and vocal timbres – a phrase of Gregorian chant is metamorphosed into an Edo Period Japanese narrative style, or an old Western hymn suddenly appears out of phrase of Japanese folk song.”

*Shi-te-ten*: Kikuko Massumoto (1980)

*Shi-te-ten* is the third and final piece from a suite of pieces entitled *Three Songs from Medieval Japan*. The lyrics for this suite are taken from folk songs of the Japanese early medieval period (10th-13th centuries). Ancient Japanese words are repeated and made into musical word plays. *Shi-te-ten* is the onomatopoetic sound of festival drumming. In this piece, the plethora of medieval Japanese *kami* deities are invited to descend and visit, lured by song. The piano is used mostly as a percussion instrument while the shakuhachi

imitates a festival flute.

(Explanations by Christopher Yohmei Blasdel)

**Christopher Yohmei Blasdel** began the shakuhachi and studies of Japanese music in 1972 with Goro Yamaguchi. In 1982 he received an MFA in ethnomusicology from Tokyo University of Fine Arts and received his professional name “Yohmei” from Yamaguchi in 1984. Performing in Japan and around the world, Blasdel maintains a balance between traditional shakuhachi music, modern compositions and cross-genre work with musicians, dancers, poets and visual artists.

Blasdel’s discography includes *Striking Light, Striking Dark*, a collaboration of shakuhachi and song with Sasha Bogdanowitsch (2014), *Navarasa*, a collaboration with shakuhachi and acoustic bass (2010), *Breath Play* (2007), *Visionary Tones* (2005) and several other CDs of traditional and contemporary music. He has composed and performed music for NHK documentaries and various films. He co-organized the Boulder World Shakuhachi Festival ’98, the Sydney Shakuhachi Festival, 2008 and was senior artistic advisor to the Prague Shakuhachi Festival from 2006 to 2015.

His writings include the most comprehensive and best-selling English language shakuhachi instruction book, *The Shakuhachi – A Manual for Learning* (Printed Matter Press, 2008) and a semiautobiographical essay, *The Single Tone – A Personal Journey through Shakuhachi Music* (Printed Matter Press, 2005 – originally published in Japanese as *Shakuhachi Odessei* by Kawade Publishers, 2000 and winner of the prestigious Rennyō Award for non-fiction), details his experiences learning and playing the shakuhachi in Japan and around the world. He taught Japanese music at International Christian University and Temple University in Tokyo and was Artistic Director of the International House of Japan from 1987 to 2013. Blasdel holds a fourth-degree black belt in Aikido and resides mostly in Honolulu but sometimes escapes back to Tokyo. This semester, he is teaching a course in Japanese music at the UHM Music Department. More information on his work can be found at [www.yohmei.com](http://www.yohmei.com).

**Mika Kimula** specializes in Japanese song composed during the process of Westernization and modernization of post 19th Century Japan. Involved in theater groups from a young age, around age 17 she began to question why there was no convincing use of the voice and Japanese language in Japanese contemporary theater and music. From this point on, Kimula began exploring various ways to utilize the voice and entered the Vocal Department of the Tokyo National University of Music and Fine Arts, where she studied Italian classical and modern songs and performed experimental works using Japanese words and lyrics.

Her interests evolved to Twentieth Century Japanese vocal compositions and traditional Japanese singing styles such as *noh* chant and *nagauta* singing. She also studied the Noguchi Taisō body awareness methods with Michizō Noguchi, whose theory emphasizes how language responds to the voice and one’s inner image of the body.

Presently, Kimula records, lectures, writes and gives workshops throughout Japan, the Americas and Asia. Discography includes a CD released from Teichiku Records, *Vocal*

*Music in Twentieth Century Japan--The Inner Revolution between Silk and High Tech.* From 1997 to 1998, Kimula was a Fulbright Scholar in Residence at Chatham College, where she taught both language and music courses. She currently teaches at Ferris University in Yokohama.

Her work is included in the DVD & Book, *Japanese Voices —A Video Archive of Singing and Techniques in the Japanese Language* (compiled by I. Nakayama, Osaka Univ. of Arts, AD POPOLO Inc., 2008), which features the singing styles of 79 representative Japanese singers from 32 genres (including Kimula's). She also translated the explanatory booklet into English.

<http://www.adpopolo.com/jvoicesdvd/> <http://www.adpopolo.com/jvoicesdvd/>

**Hidejiro Honjō** is an award-winning shamisen performer. Honjo studied under Hidetaro Honjō and graduated from the Japanese Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music, where he currently teaches. Honjō primarily specializes in modern music and performs with the international contemporary ensemble groups and orchestras. This year he received the prestigious Asian Cultural Council award to study in New York City, and he kindly agreed to stopover in Honolulu on his return.

**Mari Yoshihara** is a scholar of American Studies with a specialization in U.S. cultural history, U.S.-Asian relations, literary and cultural studies, and gender studies. She is also an accomplished pianist who gives annual recitals in Honolulu and participates in festivals.