

*Celebrating the Genius of  
Michio Miyagi (1894-1956)*  
October 5, 2016 7:30 PM  
Merkin Concert Hall  
New York City

Concert Introductory Remarks

by Barbara Ruch

You have just heard our program open with *A Night of Rain in London* (*Rondon no yoru no ame*), one of Miyagi's great solo masterpieces from his mature years, played by the brilliant Satomi Fukami, a direct disciple of Miyagi's star disciple who is now a Living Cultural Treasure. I wonder if perhaps you listened with your eyes closed, as Miyagi himself would have, being sealed off from the visual world as he was by his blindness, having totally lost his sight by the time he was eight years old. As you will read in the program, during that unusual night of heavy rain, with his eyes literally shut, he composed this piece in his London hotel room "seeing" the rain-drenched London night only with his ears.

Now let me say "Good evening" and "Welcome" to this celebration of the musical genius of Michio Miyagi. I am Barbara Ruch, Director of IMJS: Japanese Cultural Heritage Initiatives at Columbia University, where Ken Aoki and I, and colleagues from

various departments and schools are at work on several fronts in New York and in Japan, in support of the renaissance of the great heritage of “born-in-Japan” musical instruments.

There are, of course, many fine born-in-Japan instruments and musicians. Why then tonight, why Miyagi? Frankly, it is because we missed the 120th celebration of his birth two years ago in 2014. There were quite wonderful celebrations in Japan. His complete works in a huge CD collection were issued. Books, biographies and memoirs, and concert series were held. But it was all planned as if “in-house” – as it were – as if for a private party of Japanese for Japanese. So we in New York were caught unaware without time to plan.

This year, 2016, however, is the 60th anniversary of his shocking, untimely death in a train accident. I was in Osaka at the time and saw the outpouring of public grief over the loss of this amazing artist. It was preposterous in this day and age for Japan to treat an extraordinary man such as Miyagi as if just some local hero. With musicians, he has global recognition, though certainly not as much as he deserves. There is a list of reasons too long to recite here why Japan should be advertising their pride in Miyagi’s genius, just as they do today in their Nobel Prize winners in the sciences!

So here in New York tonight, we will celebrate the life and music of Michio Miyagi. We want to focus tonight on only three aspects of the man. First, Miyagi as the open-minded bridge over the troubled waters of Japanese *ryūha*, or rival schools of koto. Second, Miyagi was the instrument innovator always looking for the next possibility to enrich the voice of his beloved koto. And third, Miyagi as a composer who had an astounding erudition in all manner of music genre East and West because he lived just as the technology to record music was made commercial with the sudden (1910-1920) breakthrough in discography. He eagerly sought whatever music was being recorded from all over the world. As a musician, he was solidly trained in the koto tradition, yet was always inspired by hearing new techniques on other instruments, and he created not a mushy kind of fusion of East and West, but his own musical grammar.

So first, the open-minded, collaborating Miyagi: He was the first Japanese koto master to bring an Ikuta school master and Yamada school master together in a duo on the same public stage. That was unheard of in 1933. Actually in some quarters it is still unheard of today. These schools of playing methodology are not enemies. They are rivals for the allegiance of disciples on which they depend financially. But Miyagi broke the taboo brilliantly in the next piece we will hear, *Confluent Rays of Light* (*Sashisou Hikari*.) Please see the program for details of how he did this, because it has great significance. It brings me great joy that our koto artists tonight are from several

disparate schools, but they have nonetheless come together on this stage, inspired by Miyagi's example. For some, it may be the first time in their lives they have shared a program with each other.

Second, there is Miyagi as astounding instrument-innovator. He was not some wild experimenter who delighted in attacking tradition, but rather he was an innovator with deep reverence for the traditional instrument. He wanted to expand the traditional, centuries-old 13-string koto voice to go into deeper registers and so added strings, creating the 17-string bass koto which he premiered to great excitement in Tokyo in the next piece you will hear, *Dance of the Fallen Leaves (Ochiba no odori)*. Then he devised a smaller-sized 17-string koto for which he composed the concluding piece in tonight's Part I, *Rippling Stream (Seoto)*.

Just yesterday I was asked what I think about Miyagi's initiation of the innovation of the koto itself? Is innovation a good thing? Or is it destructive of so-called tradition? My answer was, and is, "It is a very good thing!" Music lovers tend not to pay much attention to such mechanical things, but take a look at the instruments and composers in the West that we know best! Mozart played and composed on a 5-octave clavichord innovated by the Italian harpsichord master Cristofori so it could play soft and loud. John Bradwood, the Scotsman, expanded the keyboard for Beethoven to 6-octaves, and

then to a 7-octave instrument. For Liszt, who wanted really swift action and the ability to repeat a note quickly, Sebastian Erard invented the double escapement action keyboard.

Then in all the works in Part I we can hear the genius of Miyagi as a composer. This is what Miyagi did for the koto. So now I invite you to enjoy these next three pieces, which, as the program explains, are in strong affirmation of the above three aspects of Miyagi's genius.

## **Part I Performances**

### **Intermission**

Welcome back to Part II. There will now be three works that demonstrate the huge range of Miyagi's influence on koto music that followed him and on composers today. The first piece is by composer Minoru Miki. He is surely known to composers in the audience because his book *Composing for Japanese Instruments* is a classic and was translated into English by composer Marty Regan. Miki was deeply influenced by Miyagi's instrumental innovations and picked up where Miyagi left off. In collaboration with performer Sōju (Keiko) Nosaka, Miki created the 21-string koto. And he composed

*The Greening (Hanayagi)* for that instrument, on which Yumi Kurosawa has become a master.

The second solo piece, *Like a Bird (Tori no yōni)*, is by Tadao Sawai, the famed performer and composer of the 1970-80s who was deeply influenced by Miyagi's belief that the koto belongs with full citizenship in the world of modern music. Sawai's stated mission was to inspire worldwide appreciation for koto music. His *Like a Bird* has certainly done that. It will be played by Masayo Ishigure – his direct disciple.

The third piece is by the young composer Dai Fujikura, trained wholly in the U.K. and the favored composer of the Okeanos Sextet in London which is comprised of three Western and three Japanese instruments. Fujikura, the innovative composer, says he put the koto and the viola together, expanded the technique of both instruments beyond tradition to create a kind of "imaginary," "Super-koto." He wanted this piece to play like a sword that has the sharpness and precision to cut the sky. Well, we shall see!

## **Part II Performances**

We conclude the program tonight with a real treat, Michio Miyagi's *The Sea in Spring (Haru no Umi)*, in a first ever arrangement. Miyagi composed this in mid-career at age 35,

for the traditional pairing of koto and shakuhachi. Extraordinary in its beauty one can hear the gentle waves of the spring sea lapping the shore, the gulls soaring, dipping and calling, the comforting melodies of fishermen's folk songs echoing from their passing boats. This is the work that launched him into international fame in 1929 when visiting French violinist Renée Chemet heard Miyagi play this piece in concert in Tokyo and in great excitement immediately went back to her hotel room and arranged the shakuhachi part for her violin. She played it the next day for Miyagi, who was astonished and also overjoyed. They played it together in concert and recorded it in Tokyo right away. It then became famous among violinists and was a favorite, for example, in Isaac Stern's repertory.

I was deeply moved to learn that even after that disastrous Fukushima earthquake and tsunami in the end of winter in March of 2011, some musicians selected this work to play in concerts for the grieving survivors of the tsunami. Considering what the sea had done to them and their lives, I was astounded. But the restorative calm, beauty and serenity of the piece seemed to say, "This too shall pass." The sea's monstrous convulsion is over! With spring it has returned to normal – a source of great bounty and beauty for us all.

Miyagi's *The Sea in Spring* will be heard tonight in a first ever new arrangement. So, in the spirit of Miyagi himself the composer, the collaborative performer, the inspiring innovator, and before all else the inventor of his own musical grammar, we present a new three-part arrangement of Miyagi's *The Sea in Spring* with the traditional koto and shakuhachi, then, for the first time, the viola instead of shakuhachi or violin. And then all three, the koto, the shakuhachi and the viola together, something old, something new, something borrowed, and something sea blue. Could I be speaking of a wedding? There are all sorts of meanings from this wedding of wind and strings for you to think out. May you be as inspired by Miyagi as all of us have been – and still are. *The Sea in Spring*.



**IMJS: JAPANESE CULTURAL HERITAGE INITIATIVES**

**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

407 Kent Hall, MC 3907  
1140 Amsterdam Avenue  
New York, NY 10027  
Tel: (212) 854-7403  
Fax: (212) 854-1470

Email: [medievaljapan@columbia.edu](mailto:medievaljapan@columbia.edu)  
[www.medievaljapanesestudies.org](http://www.medievaljapanesestudies.org)