

Music From Japan: Festival restoring culture after nuclear devastation

[Music](#) | July 31, 2018 | by [Michael Huebner](#) | [Edit](#)

Featured image: Naoyuki Miura, co-founder, Music From Japan (photo: Masaru Takenaka)

From July 5-9, the New York-based presenter [Music From Japan](#) invited 10 critics from [Music Critics Association of North America](#), along with two composers, to participate in [US-Canada-Japan Encounters in Music](#). Three concerts of ancient and modern music in Tokyo, followed by two days of folk music and dance performance in Fukushima Prefecture were included. The critics were John Fleming (Tampa Bay), Susan Brodie (New York, Paris), Richard Ginell (Los Angeles), Nancy Malitz (Chicago), Johanna Keller (Syracuse), William Littler (Toronto), Michael Anthony (Minneapolis), Michael Huebner (Birmingham, Ala.), Gil French (Rochester, N.Y.) and Sarah Bryan Miller (St. Louis). Composers were Zosha Di Castri (New York) and Anthony Cheung (Chicago).

Fukushima, Japan — What began as an introduction of Japanese contemporary music to American audiences has blossomed into a 44-year global journey of concerts, commissions and, since 2011, cultural restoration.

The concert presenter [Music From Japan](#) has taken music from its annual festivals in New York to places as far afield as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Brazil and, of course, Japan. MFJ founders [Naoyuki Miura](#) and his wife, [Mari Ono](#), both passionate devotees of their native country's new music scene, have commissioned 85 new works and presented them alongside existing music from Japan and elsewhere.

A masked dance is performed in Fukushima, Japan, where efforts are being made to restore the arts in the wake of the disastrous events of March 2011. (photo: Masaru Takenaka)

But in the wake of the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in eastern Japan, MFJ turned its attention to [Fukushima](#), and to the once-idyllic village of [Iitate](#), which was ordered evacuated because of nuclear radiation. Only in 2017 were villagers given the official all-clear to return.

Encounters in Music: The Festival and Institute

In early July, MFJ teamed up with the Music Critics Association of North America to bring two composers and 10 critics from the United States and Canada to Tokyo, Fukushima and Iitate for US-Canada-Japan Encounters in Music, an MCANA Institute that included new music concerts in Tokyo, folk music and dance in Fukushima and Iitate, panel discussions, lectures on music and nuclear radiation, even a night at a traditional onsen in the mountains near Fukushima City.

MFJ's efforts to support disaster victims began at its annual New York festival in 2012. Additional concerts were held in Tokyo and Fukushima in 2015. The goal was to raise awareness of continuing restoration in this devastated area.

“In 2012, after only one year, people started to forget about what happened,” recalled Miura. “So in 2012, the mayor elect of Iitate gave lectures in New York and Washington. We commissioned several pieces, both poems and music.”

The Concerts

One of those commissions, Fuyuhiko Sasaki's “To Be Human,” was the highlight of the July 5 opening concert at Tokyo Concerts Lab in Tokyo's Shinjuku area. Written for voice, kugo (harp) and haisho (panpipes) and set to a poem by Jotaro Wakamatsu, it gently and poignantly entices Iitate villagers to return to daily activities such as planting and harvesting rice. Sasaki, who performed on kugo, and Takeshi Sasamoto, on haisho, provided the accompaniment to Hitomi Nakamura's heartfelt singing.

Fuyuhiko Sasaki performs kugo, a traditional Japanese harp, in his composition, “To Be Human.” (photo: Sachie Hamaya)

The concert began with a gagaku ensemble conjuring sounds of Japan's imperial past. The musicians, dressed in traditional garb, created a centuries-old ambiance with the mesmerizing sounds of koto (zither), flutes, sho (17-reed mouth organ) and biwa (lute). Sho virtuoso Mayumi Miyata then jumped to the 20th century, impeccably balancing sound and silence in “One⁹,” by American composer John Cage. Ichiro Nodaira further projected the possibilities of the sho with the startling stops, starts, attacks and hesitations in “Voix intérieur.”

The second concert, on July 6, began with Yuta Bandoh's “Seesaw” and ended with Hiroyuki Yamamoto's “New York Dance,” both composed in 2016 and both cleverly scored for mixed quintets. The formidable talents of cellist Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi exposed the inherent lyricism in Shigeaki Saegusa's “Cello '88” and the anger

and tension of “Wadatsumi,” in which composer Tomiko Kohjiba depicted the 2011 tragedy.

Though it wasn't a literal reference to the March 2011 events, Norio Fukushi's “The Night of Full Moon” brought those emotions to the forefront. The mythological story of a princess who must depart for her home in the moon was powerfully sung by Keiko Aoyama, accompanied by the raw, breathy commentary of nohkan (flute) player Kohei Nishikawa.

A gagaku ensemble performed on July 5. These royal court ensembles have existed in Japan for more than a millennium, performing on instruments such as koto (left), various kinds of flutes, sho (reed mouth organ) and biwa (lute). (photo: Sachie Hamaya)

On July 7, the venue shifted to Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, where the Tokyo Sinfonietta, a new music specialty ensemble, performed five works. Tokuhide Niimi's alternately shrill and lyrical Piano Quintet was followed by the atmospheric, at times impressionistic, undersea evocations of Naoko Hishinuma's “In the Deep Sea II.” North American music then took over, first with Julia Wolfe's resonant, at times clangorous “Vermeer Room,” then works by two composers who were traveling with the festival.

The first of those, “Cortège,” composed in 2010 by the Canadian composer Zosha Di Castri, was inspired by a Plutarch story and Leonard Cohen's “Alexandra Leaving.” It ranges from softly minimal to busily tense fabrics, constantly searching, never wanting for anticipation, and with touches of humor. This dynamic reading by the Tokyo Sinfonietta under the baton of Yasuaki Itakura played fully to the hall's lively acoustics.

Cellist Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi and pianist Kaori Osuga perform Tomiko Kohjiba's “Wadatsumi,” an MFJ commission dedicated to the people of Tohoku area. (photo: Sachie Hamaya)

With “vis-à-vis,” Chicago-based composer Anthony Cheung has created what he calls a contemporary concerto grosso. Scored in 2010 for 18 musicians and electronics, it requires a real-time electronics operator, situated in the back of the hall in this case, and sensitive coordination from the podium. The spatial results, coupled with a diverse palette of instrumental sonorities and textures, were ideal for this hall and ensemble.

Nuclear Recovery

Seven years after Japan suffered massive devastation because of the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, reconstruction and cleanup efforts are still underway. More

than 16,000 died in the disasters and 100,000 were evacuated in 2011. Nearly 75,000 have not returned to their homes.

Almost overlooked in the damage caused by the explosions at Daiichi Nuclear Plant was the potential loss of centuries of artistic traditions. Music From Japan organizers, journalists and a nuclear scientist wanted to point out that despite the devastation, these traditions are being valiantly upheld in Fukushima Prefecture, home to one of the most vibrant folk arts traditions in Japan.

Sho virtuoso Mayumi Miyata performs John Cage's "One9" on sho, a 17-reed wind instrument with roots that date to the 8th century. (photo: Sachie Hamaya)

Recovery of those traditions had a profound meaning for MFJ founder Miura, who was born in Fukushima, whose mother was from Iitate, and whose cousin was mayor of the village.

"Yuki (Naoyuki) spent summers in Iitate during his childhood," Ono said during a stop at Takayu Onsen on the outskirts of Fukushima. "It's really a very close family."

At Fukushima Concert Hall in the prefecture's capital city, a concert on July 8 presented local performers whose talents might rival international touring groups. Sword dancers, kimono-clad taiko drummers and elaborately masked dancers played out rituals for rice planting, health and purification, and expulsion of evil spirits. Children, some very young, made offerings and danced in homemade costumes.

"Dancing together and singing together builds community," critic Sarah Bryan Miller told NHK World News. "They have persevered through very hard times. Some people would have given up, but they have pressed on."

On the drive from Fukushima to Iitate, large "flecon" bags filled with contaminated soil, trees and plants and covered by green tarps lined the roads. Despite those ominous images, local officials presented evidence that radiation levels were back to normal. In fact, Fukushima City is planning to host baseball and softball games for the 2020 Olympic Games, NHK reporter NHK Ken Azuma pointed out at a lecture.

Flecor bags covered by tarps and containing contaminated debris are stored along roadside in Fukushima Prefecture. (Photo: Michael Huebner)

In Iitate, where winds and rain had deposited radiation from the Daiichi plant, the 2011 evacuation reduced the population from more than 6,000 to 41. Today there are hopeful signs of a return to normalcy. Although many former residents have opted not to return

despite the 2017 lifting of the evacuation order, farming and fishing are starting to recover and the village is slowly being repopulated. Our entourage received a tour of a newly built school, where music and dance from its rich folk tradition was presented by students.

“We shouldn’t let the centuries old traditions die,” Satoshi Hamana, a children’s dance troupe leader, told NHK. “We cannot possibly give up on the dance troupes.”

MFJ in 2019

Like it has during for over four decades, MFJ will continue its efforts to present music by Japanese composers in February and March, 2019.

Children perform July 8 for critics, composers and onlookers at Fukushima Concert Hall. (photo: Masaru Takenaka)

“Yumi Saiki will be the featured composer, and she is to write a chamber piece,” said Ono. “Musicologist Miyuki Shiraishi, who is a specialist on John Cage in Japan, is thinking of creating a program of composers who were influenced by Cage.”

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[Michael Huebner’s story about MFJ commissions at Classical Voice America](#)

[Sarah Bryan Miller’s story at St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#)

Video link:

[St. Louis critic Sarah Bryan Miller speaks to children, comments about the importance of culture in their lives](#)

[Mari Ono Music Critics Association of North America Music From Japan Naoyuki Miura](#)

About the Author



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MICHAEL HUEBNER has written about classical music, dance, visual arts, travel and various other topics since graduate studies in music composition at the University of Kansas in the late '70s. For 10 years, he wrote for the Kansas City Star as a freelancer, and another 10 for the Austin American-Statesman. He joined the Birmingham News staff in 2001, recently leaving that position after 13 years with the News and AL.com.