

MASAKO OHTA

»My Japanese Heart«

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The Japanese pianist **Masako Ohta** presents an unusual and fascinating insight into the Japanese world of music. Centuries-old folk and court music meet with contemporary compositions and form a musical complete artwork. With works by great Japanese composers such as **Kengyo Yatsushashi** from the 17th century, **Kengyo Yoshizawa** from the 19th century, **Toru Takemitsu** from the 20th century, as well as by contemporaries such as **Toshio Hosokawa** and **Fumio Yasuda**. **Yasuda** contributes a commissioned composition for this album. The listener goes on a journey to Japan through space and time. However, no koto, no shakuhachi and no taiko sound, but the strings of a contemporary concert grand piano.

Masako Ohta lives in Munich since 1988. She has become a native of Munich and with her numerous concerts and interdisciplinary productions with poeise, calligraphy, dance, theatre and music, she has influenced cultural events far beyond the borders of her adopted home. In 2019 she was honoured by the City of Munich with the prestigious *Förderpreis für Musik*, which is awarded only every two years. But even though she is now a native of Munich, her roots still reach as far as Japan. Her Japanese heart beats inside her and with attention and devotion she continues to develop her cultural legacy, working with Japanese composers, dancers and reciting haikus. The philosophy of Japanese culture flows into the music of **Masako Ohta** tone by tone. This now comes into its own on the album »My Japanese Heart«.

As in Japanese architecture, space and time also play a decisive role in music. Three elements - “間” (*ma*) interval/period/time, “多層性” (*tasousei*) complexity/on several levels/multiple layers and “奥” (*oku*) inner life/internal/interior space play a key role. Space and time are inseparably linked in Japan.

Many Japanese images (*Japanese wall screens, woodblock prints, ink paintings*) are fundamentally different from Western art. Japanese art often offers free, depending on the technique monochrome or gilded surfaces, which the viewer fills with his imagination and experiences. Western art, on the other hand, is usually filled with colours and shapes from picture edge to picture edge, and compositions rarely dare pure silence, but the silence between a fading sound and a new ton is usually defined in Western music as a pause.

In Japan a special relationship exists between humans and nature. Humans create their own little paradise to experience nature. For example, a water basin made of wood or stone is designed in such a way that raindrops can fall from the roof into the middle. At night the full moon is reflected on the water surface and is moved by the soft waves, so that the reappearance appears and disappears. Painting (for example from the *Edo period, 17th century*) also offers fantastic pictorial worlds that often deal with nature. This questioning

of the beauty of nature takes place not only in Japanese painting, architecture and garden art, but also in music.

These characteristics of Japanese art and music have not been lost, among other reasons, because an interim, self-imposed isolation during the Edo period (1603 to 1868) ensured that Western influences could not penetrate until the middle of the 19th century through an opening forced by the Americans. Even the so-called *Sonnō jōi* movement (‘worship the emperor, expel the barbarians’) cannot stop this development. But due to the centuries-long isolation from western influences and the special island location, cultural characteristics are preserved, which can still be felt in contemporary music and art.

With »*Melodia II*« **Masako Ohta** opens her album. Quote by the composer **Toshio Hosokawa**: “This work was written during my student days in Berlin in 1977, after a task from my professor **Isang Yun** to rewrite a composition with tonalities ... I imagine the starry sky at night, and one star after the other falls from the sky ... The basic version called »*At Midnight in the Kitchen I Just Wanted to Talk to You*« is inspired by **Shuntarō Tanikawa**’s book of poems with the same title ... This composition is initially longer. Two years later I composed »*Melodia*« for accordion, which is a success. In the same year I wrote a (shortened) version of »*At Midnight in the Kit...*« for piano and give it the title »*Melodia II*«.”

After **Hosokawa**'s universium, the musical journey leads into the 17th century into the sound world of the composer, shamisen and koto player **Kengyo Yatsushashi**, who revolutionized the koto by elevating it to the status of a solo instrument, thereby freeing it from the role of an accompanying instrument. He receives the nickname ‘*Kengyo*’ as an honorary title as a highly qualified blind musician. He is also called the father of the ‘*Koto of the modern age*’. »*Rokudan no Shirabe*« - one of his most famous pieces - is called “箏曲” (*sōkyoku*) koto music. *Sōkyoku* is a style of Japanese classical music that was already very popular during **Yatsushashi**'s lifetime. *Sōkyoku* is originally, as the name already reveals, played with a koto and can be accompanied by a shamisen and, depending on the occasion, additionally by a shakuhachi. It is a kind of chamber music, although this term is not used in Japan during the Edo period. »*Rokudan no Shirabe*« is divided into six steps, hence the name »*Six steps of melodies*«.

Toru Takemitsu belongs to the most important composers of the 20th century. However, his interest is not only in music, but also in literature, modern painting and film, among other works he is known for his numerous film scores. In 1951, together with other artists, he founded the group ‘*Experimental Workshop*’, which soon attracted attention for its avant-garde and multimedia presentations.

Many of **Takemitsu's** works have a connection with nature. »*Rain-Tree Sketch*«, written in 1983, is one of a series of works related to the elixir of water. Connoisseurs of Japanese literature associate the irregular tempo and organic texture of »*Rain-Tree Sketch*« with **Kenzaburō Ōe's** »*The Wise Rain Tree*«, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994. **Takemitsu** dedicated his composition to the French composer, music journalist, radio producer, art administrator and festival organizer **Maurice Fleuret** as a gift for his 50th birthday. »*The Wise Rain Tree*« is a story of a tree with countless small leaves that catch the water from a morning rain shower, store it and only let it slowly drip to earth during the course of the day when no more rain falls from the sky. **Takemitsu** seems to paint a sound picture of this scene. **Takemitsu** gives »*Rain-Tree Sketch II*« the additional title »*In Memoriam Olivier Messiaen*«. His sound language sometimes reminds of **Messiaen**, but also of **Debussy**. »*Rain-Tree Sketch II*«, written in 1992, is considered **Takemitsu's** last work for piano.

In 1929 **Michio Miyagi**, an important and famous koto player, wrote »*Sea in Spring*« (»*Haru no Umi*«) for koto and shakuhachi. **Miyagi** composed this piece in memory of a childhood image of the sea in Tomonoura Bay that he saw before he lost his eyesight. It is his best-known work, which has been performed and recorded with great success outside Japan. In 1932 the French violinist **Renée Chemet** visited Japan as part of a concert tour. After hearing a performance of **Miyagi's** »*Haru no Umi*«, she adapted the shakuhachi part for violin. Together with **Miyagi**, she recorded this work and after its release in Japan, the United States and Great Britain, **Miyagi** gained worldwide recognition. He writes more than 500 compositions, helps to improve the technique of Japanese string instruments and invents a new koto with 17 strings (*originally with 13*), which allows much lower tones. He is also known as an essayist and has published more than ten books, including »*Ame no Nenbutsu*«, loosely translated »*The Rain Preacher*«.

The »*Song of the Plover*« (»*Chidori no Kyoku*«) by **Kengyo Yoshizawa** is one of the most important pieces of the fading Edo period. The last phase, from 1853 to 1868, is already the time of upheaval and is called *Bakumatsu*, the end of the era of *Shōguns*, who have ruled similar to European dukes since the 12th century. This period ranges from the arrival of the »*Black Ships*« of Commodore **Matthew Calbraith Perry** (1853), which lead to the forced opening of Japan, to the abolition of *Shōgunats* and the renewal of the power of *Tennō*, known as the *Meiji Restoration* (1868).

Kengyo Yoshizawa's compositional style is inspired by *Gagaku*, a courtly style of music that has been played at the Japanese imperial house since the 7th century. »*Chidori no Kyoku*«, originally composed for voice and koto, introduces two *waka*. *Waka* belongs to the genre of Japanese poetry of the *Golden Heian Period* (around 794).

Kiyoshige Koyama's »*Kagome-Variation*« (»*Seagull-Variation*«) is based on a well-known children's song that is sung to a game that almost every child in Japan plays. A bird in a basket is a »*Kagome Kagome*«. »*When do I leave? At dawn, afternoon, late evening...*« A child becomes an *Oni* (demon or monster) and sits blindfolded in the middle of a circle. The other children hold hands and run around the *Oni* in a circle while singing the song to the game. When the song and with it the circling stops, the child in the middle has to say

the name of the child behind him/her, and if it is correct, this child becomes an *Oni*. The name of the game comes from the fact that the *oni* sits like a bird in the cage of the other children.

Kiyoshige Koyama, who grew up in the countryside in the prefecture of Nagano, studied music in Tokyo and worked as a music teacher and composer. His teaching activities and his contact with children inspired him to write this composition.

At the end of the 1990s, the Japanese photo artist **Nobuyoshi Araki** introduced the composer and pianist **Fumio Yasuda**, who is at home in both contemporary composition and improvisation, to **Stefan Winter**. An extraordinary collaboration begins, which goes beyond the boundaries of conventional music production and leads to the creation of interdisciplinary sound art works. In 2020 the world premiere of »*The Ninth Wave - Ode To Nature*« takes place at the *Spring Festival in Tokyo*. It is a film, music and sound art work after **Ludwig van Beethoven**, **Théodore Géricault** and **Dante Alighieri** composed by **Yasuda** and written by **Winter**. **Fumio Yasuda** writes »*Hibusi*« for **Masako Ohta** and explains: "This song is inspired by the old Japanese fictional bird »*飛附子*« (»*Hibusi*«). There are very different kinds of these fancy mythical creatures, each of which plays a divine role. This bird is my imagination and my own secret."

»*Tooshin Do-i*«, a folk and dance song from the former kingdom of Okinawa in southern Japan, has a centuries-old tradition. In colourful, exotic costumes this song is performed at the end of the *Obon-Festival* in summer to honour the ancestors.

»*Tinsagu nu Hana*« (»*The Blossoms of Balm*«) is an Okinawan children's song. It is said that children use the squeezed juice of balsam flowers to dye their fingernails with the pigments to ward off evil: *Just as my fingernails are dyed with the pigments of the balsam flowers, my heart is filled with the teachings of my parents.* The text of the song is a Confucian teaching. The last verse ends with the words *that you can do anything if you only try, but this is denied if you do not dare.*

Masako Ohta creates her own improvisation and leaves the pure interpretation of composition behind. She not only plays freely and interprets these songs in her own personal way, but also creates her own sound world with a prepared concert grand piano.

The journey through Japan's space and time ends with **Toru Takemitsu's** »*Litany - In Memory of Michael Vyner*«. **Michael Vyner**, English cultural manager, formerly employed by Schott Music, directed the *London Sinfonietta* from 1972 until his death in 1989. »*Litany*« is a revision of his composition »*Lento in Due Movimenti*« from 1950, his first publicly performed work. In 1989 **Takemitsu** composed »*Lento in Due Movimenti*« with new elements and published this work under the name »*Litany - In Memory of Michael Vyner*«.

With virtuosity and highest sensitivity **Masako Ohta** leads us into Japan's world of sound, she creates a journey through space and time, a journey into the musical art of Japan of today and past centuries.

— WINTER & WINTER