

RECITAL REVIEW

Koto Sensation

February 18, 2003



Keiko Nosaka

By Heuwell Tircuit

Keiko Nosaka played an amazing koto recital last Tuesday evening in Berkeley's First Congregational Church, part of the Music from Japan Festival 2003 presented by Cal Performances. The conclusion was greeted with a standing ovation, but one hardly knew if one should merely stand or reverently kowtow before such a master musician. Her importance to Japanese music cannot be overestimated.

The evening opened with Nosaka's own *Tsugaru* from 1986, followed by Ryohei Hirose's *Ukifune* (2002), the most harmonically advanced piece of the program. To conclude the first half, Nosaka was joined by her daughter Mizuyo Komiya for the venerable Akira Ifukube's arrangement of his two-movement *Ballata Sinfonia* for treble and bass 25-string kotos. (The original is an orchestral work, which Ifukube reworked for Nosaka in 2001.)

Following intermission Nosaka offered Hirose's rather terse Variations on *Midare* (1980), and Ifukube's grandly scaled *Pipa Xing* (1999). Apologizing that she had a plane to catch back to Japan the next morning, Nosaka offered only one encore, a little set of flashy variations of the traditional *Sakura*. That best-known of Japanese folk songs was singularly appropriate since sakura, or cherry blossoms, happen to be currently in bloom around the Bay.

An acclaimed master

Nosaka's name is a legend in traditional Japanese music. Quite apart from her flawless technical command, she has done more to advance the sound and concept of koto performance in the past 30 years than had occurred over the previous 1300. Among other things, she help invent and introduce the 20-string koto in 1969 and, in 1991, the still newer 25-string koto, which adds all sorts of deep resonant bass to the instrument. (The traditional koto has only 13 strings.)

One can compare what Nosaka has achieved for the Japanese harp to advances made by the great 20th Century Spanish guitarists guitarists Andrés Segovia and Narciso Yepes, and harpist Nicanor Zabaleta. As did they, Nosaka has also worked with modern composers to advance new types of instrumental sounds. Some of these were heard during the Berkeley performance, such as the snapped pizzicato famously used in the Bartók string quartets: the string is lifted and allowed to snap back against the sound bridge. In one effective but startling moment, Nosaka slapped the strings with the flat hand in the jazz-bass manner. She produced a scraping sound along the strings that reminded me of Henry Cowell's early piano pieces, notably "The Banshee".

All this, however, would amount to little more than pointless curios unless put to some musical purpose, which is exactly what Nosaka accomplished. Her sensibility to timbre, coupled with uncanny rhythmic control and refined application of flexibility within meter, was superb. That was doubly impressive considering the nature of the instrument, where the action of string pressure can so easily lead to rhythmic slips.

Less is more

There are concepts in the performance of Japanese music that are generally unknown to Western musicians — silence, for instance. The Japanese draw a distinction between tense silence and relaxed silence, with several degrees of tension between those extremes. They draw a line, for example, between a frightened tense silence and a happy silent tension. I haven't a clue as to how this is accomplished, but they actually can do it to hold the audience while nothing at all is happening. Nosaka clearly controls this aspect of performance. Things never flagged.

Nearly every piece on her program carried a descriptive title. (The *Sinfonia* might be the exception.) That's very common in Asian music, where pure abstraction was traditionally shunned. But only in the grasp of a true master have I experienced any sensation of what is supposed to be pictured. It's a matter of indoctrination rather than reality for me, but Nosaka often achieved strong suggestions of the situations.

Tsugaru is the district at the northernmost tip of Honshu, Japan's largest island. It's a bleak place, as famous for its bad

weather and roaring sea as Cornwall. Nosaka's winterscape began with incredibly bleak sounds, later shifting into a kind of folksy *shamisen* music (the *shamisen* is a quasi banjo) as a little dance piece. But even the faster music remained tense and loaded with tragic implications that were in the playing, not just in the notated composition.

Contrasting facades

The difference between Ifukube's two works proved considerable. He was born in 1914 and *Ballata Sinfonia* harks back to his early folksy background as a student of Alexander Tcherepnin and his first successes back in the 1930s. He even had an early orchestral piece, *Japanese Rhapsody*, premiered by the Boston Symphony in 1935. Folk-based ostinato in the new piece seemed to drive itself into the ground, but it is just that device that made the orchestral original such a popular success in Japan.

For *Ballata Sinfonia*, Nosaka was joined by her daughter, Mizuyo Komiya. Virtuoso fireworks dominate the sinfonia's textures. The precision of the duo blended their textures at fast tempo so keenly that it sounded much as though one person were playing both instruments.

Ifukube's *Pipa Xing*, however, is an altogether more serious and modern-sounding composition based on an antique Chinese poem concerning life in exile. Ifukube adopted a more severe style of lyricism laced with greater freedom of modern harmonic style. The result was a bit gaunt, but extremely expressive for all that. This may well become a classic.

The eminent work

Hiroso's Variations actually are based on a classic of koto repertory, *Midare*, a simple piece played by almost every kotoist. Hiroso presents the original theme then springs into mildly dissonant fireworks with the gusto of a Liszt fantasy. Yet, the most impressive piece of the evening, as a composition, proved to be Hiroso's newer *Ukifune* (Drifting Boat). It too is based on an ancient episode from "The Tale of Genji," the thousand-year-old novel.

Hiroso has developed his own style, which sounds vaguely serial though floated over a tonal foundation. It is thus a bit like the later music of Benjamin Britten but with much of the Japanese character showing through. This is a fascinating and

original piece, which ought soon to be recorded. Otherwise, wide exposure seems unlikely, since one really wonders if anyone but Nosaka can play it.

(Heuwell Tircuit, composer, performer and writer, was chief writer for Gramophone Japan and for 21 years a music reviewer for the SF Chronicle, previously for the Chicago American and Asahi Evening News.)

©2003 Heuwell Tircuit, all rights reserved

[SFCV STORE](#) | [RSS](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [DONATE](#) | [JOIN THE FRIENDS OF SFCV](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [ABOUT SFCV](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

A project of the Community Initiative Funds of the San Francisco Foundation
©2008 *San Francisco Classical Voice*

Web site design and development by Gore Creative
Powered by **WordPress**