

**Makoto Nakura – Master of the Marimba – By Maurice D. Fisher, Ph.D. Publisher**

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Several percussionists in the United States, Japan and Great Britain are developing the marimba into a full-fledged concert instrument through their brilliant technical expertise and dedication. Makoto Nakura, who has been playing this instrument for 37 years, is one of these musicians. He has given extraordinary performances with ensembles across the world, including the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. He has also presented recitals at prestigious music centers such as Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall and the Kennedy Center. Nakura has won many prizes for his musical talent including first prize (1994) in the Young Concert Artists International Audition – the first marimbist to receive this award.

He obtained both his Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from Musashino College of Music in Tokyo with a Master's thesis that discussed the marimba as a solo instrument. In addition, he studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and acquired an appreciation for Debussy's piano preludes and Schoenberg's twelve-tone music while attending the Royal Academy. In 1994 Nakura moved from Tokyo to New York City.

"Nakura has developed collaborative works with institutions such as the American Ballet Theatre at the Metropolitan Opera and with other art forms, including Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez's *The Ocean Calls*, based on poems by Pablo Neruda. With story-telling image projection, he created *The Story of Aoyagi*, which is a venerable Japanese ghost story. He also produced a concert called *The Encounter of Art and Music* with the Hyogo Prefectural Art Museum in Japan, playing pieces inspired by Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning among others." Interview on Musser Mallet Percussion Web Site (2008).

Because of my study of and performance on various percussion instruments many years ago during high school and college, I was eager to hear Makoto Nakura in concert. My wife and I attended a recital during the spring of 2009 where he played a wide range of classical and popular works, many of which he had transcribed for marimba. These pieces included composers and musical genres from Bach and Villa-Lobos to Sukegawa, Osada, Amazing Grace and Danny Boy. His technical skills and sensitivity to the musical characteristics of each composition were amazing. The marimba playing had a beautiful sonority and an almost hypnotizing effect caused by swift mallet movements, and deep penetrating sounds emanating from the rosewood keyboard. Nakura is a master at producing these simultaneous visual and auditory effects. His ability to extract the best

melodic characteristics of this instrument from a variety of works, such as Bach's Solo Violin Partita No. 3 in E Major (transcribed), demonstrates musicianship at its highest level. It is comparable to performances by many leading young concert violinists and pianists. Moreover, his playing on fast and percussive works clearly shows giftedness in action.

As a strong advocate for making the marimba a concert instrument of the highest caliber, Makoto Nakura presents workshops and recitals all over Japan and the United States where he has performed in forty-one states. During some years he gives as many as 50 concerts. I was very interested in his early life and education, and his ideas about educating children to be good musicians and to appreciate good music. The following information is from an interview available on the Musser Mallet Percussion Web Site which occurred prior to his December 2008 concert with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. Additionally, I interviewed him during the summer of 2009.

### **Early Life**

Nakura was born in Kobe, Japan in 1964. His mother was an amateur pianist who liked to play Beethoven's Sonatas and Italian songs. In third grade he started playing the marimba because he liked its wonderful sound. His mother purchased a marimba for him and found a teacher who gave lessons at home. Concerning this time Nakura said, "Meanwhile, I had witnessed the great power of music already around this time. My mother was recovering from some surgery, and it wasn't easy. Her spirit was not gaining the strength back. But, one day she spent a whole day in front of our record player, playing symphonies by Beethoven and Schubert. After that day, she felt so much better, and she told me that great music gives us the courage to live." Interview on Musser Mallet Percussion Web Site (2008).

He continued his study of marimba, piano, drums and other percussion instruments through high school, and commuted from Kobe to Tokyo to take lessons with one of the best marimba players in Japan, Michiko Takahashi. He also attended a high school for gifted students during this period that had demanding academic standards.

### **Other Musical and Non-Musical Influences**

Nakura said he doesn't have a particular role model or mentor. He learns about music from many sources – books (particularly great literature and poetry), magazines and concerts given by other musicians. Recently, he was intrigued by an interview with the tennis player, Serena Williams (Arrive Magazine, July/August 2008), that he read while traveling on an Amtrak train. Clearly, he is curious about anything that will help to increase his musical ability and knowledge. He is also part of a culture that traditionally produced great marimba players. In this regard, Makoto said to me: "We have a role model from my grandparents' generation. Mr. Yoichi Hiraoka was a celebrated xylophonist. He came to the United States before World War II, and auditioned for ABC radio. His playing was on air every morning on the radio all over the United States. By looking at his success, many people in Japan wanted to play the marimba. My parents' generation also produced revolutionary marimba players like Michiko Takahashi and Keiko Abe who started creating a new repertoire for the marimba. Thanks to this history of more than three generations, the marimba became more popular in Japan than other countries."

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I also asked Makoto about his current concert and teaching activities, and his viewpoints on musical development and education. Here are his words on these and related topics:

Maurice Fisher: What are your favorite marimba works?

Makoto Nakura: I have commissioned many pieces from living composers. Those are on my CDs, too. Pieces by my friends and composers are: Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez, Pierre Jalbert, Kevin Puts, Kenji Bunch, Michael Torke, David Schober and Jason Eckardt – all are wonderful.

Maurice: What types of skills does it take for a student to become a successful marimba player?

Makoto: It is not a skill, but the eagerness to create something of your own that is important.

Maurice: About how many years of study does it take a student to become a good marimba player?

Makoto: It varies depending on who you are. This question is interesting, so I would like to talk about it a bit more. The marimba is such a visual instrument, so when you become competent to play rather fast, people get impressed easily. There is a danger of marimba study here. Besides technical aspects, you have to grow as a whole musician with good musicianship and musicality. But, some young students tend to forget to focus on their inner abilities because they are praised so much for their technique. When I think about this, to become a good player, there is no difference in studying the marimba as compared to other instruments.

Maurice: How many hours per day do you practice? What is your typical practice schedule?

Makoto: If I stay home, I usually practice 3-4 hours a day. I typically start with playing Bach in the morning.

Maurice: Do you believe that musical talent is innate or learned through extensive practice or the result of both?

Makoto: It is the result of both. Also, I have seen examples of individuals who have a wonderful talent, but sometimes their personality doesn't cooperate to grow the talent.

Maurice: Have you seen interest in the marimba increasing among students and concert audiences? Where? In the USA? In Europe, Asia, etc?

Makoto: I don't particularly feel increased interest at the concert level, but certainly more students are playing the marimba everywhere.

Maurice: Do you present workshops to students in the United States? If so, when and where?

Makoto: I have given master classes at nearly 60 universities in the United States. They usually occur around my concert dates.

Maurice: Who are some other outstanding marimba players besides you?

Makoto: I admire the work of my teacher, Michiko Takahashi.

Maurice: What are some top colleges/universities for studying the marimba? Do you currently teach at a college or university?

Makoto: It is hard to answer this question. Students usually go to a certain school because they want to study with a particular teacher. Each teacher has different styles – I can't say one is better than the other. Also, I believe the match between teacher and student is more important than the reputation of the school. I started teaching at Kyoto City University of Arts this spring of 2009.

Maurice: What do you believe educators should do to improve the level of music appreciation among children and adults in the United States?

Makoto: The best way would be to bring live performances to people.

Maurice: What CDs do you currently have available? Where can they be purchased?

Makoto: These three are easily available on [www.heliconrecords.com](http://www.heliconrecords.com).

**Bach Beat** Kleos Classics KL 5147

**Triple Jump** Kleos Classics KL 5133

**Ritual Protocol** Kleos Classics KL 5116

Maurice: Where can you be contacted to schedule concert appearances?

Makoto: My manager is –

Latitude 45 Arts Promotion, Inc.; 107-109 boulevard St-Joseph W.; Montreal, QC Canada H2T 2P7

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Maurice: What advice do you have for young musicians who want to develop successful careers in music?

Makoto: Try to appreciate other art forms. Enjoying fine literature and paintings has helped my career as a musician in many ways.

Maurice: What other comments would you like to make regarding marimba playing, music and musicianship that will help readers understand the importance of marimba playing and music education in children's lives?

Makoto: you have to love what you are doing by either listening to music or playing music yourself. Then, it will take you to unknown but wonderful places.



Makoto has a fan club, the *International Supporting Group for Makoto* (ISGM). He is very proud of this group since one of its main goals is to sponsor composers to write new music for the marimba. Since 2001, ISGM has supported the composition of ten new pieces. Makoto is an outstanding role model, mentor and inspiration for all dedicated instrumental music students. He is clearly a Hero of Giftedness because of his incredible musicianship, his energy and perfectionism, his determination to bring the marimba to the forefront of concert performance, and his support of both emerging talents and young marimba composers. For all of his outstanding accomplishments, he remains a humble and forthright individual.

### References

**Musser Mallet Percussion – Exclusive interview with Makoto Nakura (2008) –**

<http://www.musser-mallets.com>

**Makoto Nakura's Web Site –**

<http://www.makotonakura.com/>

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