

## ***GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE (VOLUME 19, NUMBER 1)***

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

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. 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. In 1994 Nakura moved from Tokyo to New York City.

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. 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. During this period, he also attended a high school for gifted students that had demanding academic standards.

**Interview: 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; tel: 514 276 2694; fax: 514 673 0054; mobile: 514 241 1363; [scalesb@latitude45arts.com](mailto:scalesb@latitude45arts.com); [www.latitude45arts.com](http://www.latitude45arts.com).

**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). 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 – Complete Interview (2009) –** [http://www.giftedpress.com/MAKOTO\\_NAKURA\\_MARIMBIST\\_HERO\\_OF\\_GIFTEDNESS.pdf](http://www.giftedpress.com/MAKOTO_NAKURA_MARIMBIST_HERO_OF_GIFTEDNESS.pdf); **Musser Mallet Percussion – Exclusive Interview with Makoto Nakura (2008) –** <http://www.musser-mallets.com/>; Nakura's Web Site – <http://www.Makotonakura.com/>.

**Kenneth Davis: Stimulating and Informative Writer for Gifted Students Michael E. Walters, Ed.D.**  
**Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools**

“War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength.” from **1984** by George Orwell. Quoted by Kenneth Davis, **Don't Know Much About Literature** (Harper, 2009, p. 17.)

Educators of the gifted will find the books, “Don't Know Much About. . .” by Kenneth Davis to be valuable supplementary sources which cover a wide range of topics including the American Civil War, World Myths, Space, and the Universe. **Don't Know Much About Literature** (2009) is his most recent one. The format is both informative and entertaining. However, it is his question and answer style that is significant for gifted students. He uses questions and answers in a dialogic manner, and the interchange creates a mosaic of thought and facts in the context of story telling. Davis's books are unique for the gifted because they are based on a taxonomy of knowledge where the answers stimulate subsequent questions that challenge progressively higher levels of thinking. Some of the authors he discusses are E. B. White, George Orwell, Robert Frost, and the Brontë sisters.

**E. B. White** (pp. 3-4) wrote the famous children's novel, **Charlotte's Web** (1952). It was about a relationship between a spider and a pig. Davis's questions and discussion are related to the theme of Charlotte the spider's interactions with Wilbur the pig. This story was inspired by White's observations of the animals in a barn located on his farm in Maine. Davis emphasizes that he was able to write such effective prose for children because of a successful career as a journalist. **George Orwell** (pp. 17-18) wrote two novels which are considered as both classics of fiction and political science, **Animal Farm** (1945) and **1984** (1949). Davis describes how Orwell's work during World War II, writing propaganda for the British government, affected his later essays and books about government thought control. **Robert Frost** (pp. 23-24) wrote some of the most iconic poems ever published by an American poet. Davis says Frost was able to use common objects such as apples, birch trees, hayfields, and stone walls to write such profound poems as, “The Road Not Taken” (1916) and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923). In mid-19th century England, three sisters, **Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë** (pp. 99-100), wrote profound novels about human relations – **Jane Eyre** (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, **Wuthering Heights** (1847) by Emily Brontë, and **Agnes Grey** (1847) by Anne Brontë. They were able to write so well about human emotions despite the fact that they lived such isolated and short lives. **Don't Know Much About Literature** will stimulate and enlarge the sensibility of gifted students. Davis's taxonomy of literary knowledge is expressed in both vivid and entertaining ways, and he reaches the gifted in both the cognitive and affective realms.