

History of Marimba in Japan before Keiko Abe

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Many people may recall Keiko Abe, when thinking about marimba in Japan. I would like to review history of marimba in Japan before her time.

There are two xylophone players to be noted before Keiko Abe; the first is Eiichi Asabuki(1909-1993), pioneer in marimba in Japan, who taught marimba to Keiko Abe. In fact, almost all of marimba players in Japan today may have been students of Asabuki during their career. It would be quite difficult to find anyone without Asabuki's involvement in Japan.

The second is Yoichi Hiraoka(1907-1981), two years older than Asabuki, who also happened to be a student at Keio University.

He was fascinated with xylophone and after playing xylophone in Japan for some time, he went to the US. In 1963, Hiraoka asked Toshiro Mayuzumi to compose "Concerto for Xylophone and Orchestra", which was supposedly scheduled to be played by New York Philharmony Orchestra under the direction of Leonard Bernstein. Unfortunately, we cannot find any record. In 1965, Chicago Symphony Orchestra directed by Seiji Ozawa premiered "Fantasie on Japanese Woodprints", which was commissioned to Alan Hovanes. Hiraoka was a xylophone player through his lifetime, and never played marimba.

Asabuki and Hiraoka's encounter with xylophone was at around 1920. Xylophone players were almost non-existent then in Japan. Listening to the record his mother had bought, Asabuki was inspired by American xylophone player William H. Reitz playing "William Tell Fantasy". He immediately went to a department store to purchase 2 1/2oct xylophone and practiced all by himself, listening to the record over and over again, because textbooks were unavailable. It was during the Golden Age of Xylophone in the US, Ragtime being popular with players such as George Hamilton Green.

Asabuki was quite active ever since his first performance on radio at the age of 17. He played xylophone on radio in the morning for 5 1/2 years from 1951 and inspired many people. Many musicians began to play xylophone after him. He was also

energetic as a composer as well as arranger. Musical notes for xylophone were scarce in Japan and rare even in the US then. Asabuki's first composition "Bella in Karuizawa" was written at the age of 19. His composition for xylophone and marimba total 119 pieces and arrangements more than 1,000 pieces. "Sparks", "Fantasie a la neige", "Water Drops" and "Two Woodpeckers Polka" are published by Studio 4 Production in the US.

Tokyo Xylophone Club was founded in 1950, with Yoichi Hiraoka serving as advisor. Its first concert was held in the same year with 13-year-old Keiko Abe, conductor Hiroyuki Iwaki and others. As xylophone gained popularity and Club members increased, the Club was reorganized to become Japan Xylophone Association. There are 25 chapters across the nation with more than 2,000 members today.

Marimba in Japan faced a turning point at around 1950.

Lacour Musical Evangelistic Crusade missionary team consisting of preachers Mr and Mrs Lacour and two other women came to Japan. They used trailer that can be turned into a performance stage and visited different locations across Japan during summer for two months, over a period of 6 years. Keiko Abe was one of many who was deeply moved by their marimba performance which she heard at a chapel of her high school.

Jack Conner's visit soon followed. His performance was at Kobe College High School, elegantly using 4 mallets, when the mainstream then was to use 2 mallets. He played pieces such as

Piano Sonata by Mozart, and Joy of Man's Desiring by J.S.Bach. My mother and marimbist Yukie Kurihara was 17 years old when she heard his performance. It was this experience that made her determined to learn marimba. Yukie learned marimba under Asabuki and became his Duo partner over many years. "Fantasie a la Neige" is a piece that was dedicated to her.

Jack Conner elevated marimba and vibraphone to be a solo instrument in the world of classical music. Darius Milhaud was another person inspired by Jack Conner. "Concerto for Marimba and Vibraphone" was composed for Conner, after his New York Debut in 1950. This Concerto was played in Japan by Japan Philharmony Orchestra in 1955. It was also performed with Sumire Hoshino, a prominent pianist in Japan.

The next turning point was 1962. Musical pieces by Asabuki and arrangement for marimba and piano from master pieces for orchestra were frequently played in Japan till then. In 1962, “Tokyo Marimba Group”, founded by young marimba players in their 20s such as Keiko Abe, Noriko Hasegawa, Shizuko Ishikawa, Takuo Tamura, Yoshihisa Mizuno and Masao Yoshikawa. They wanted young, up-and-coming composers to write music for marimba. Contemporary marimba music “Suite for Marimba Conversation”, “Torse 3” by Akira Miyosi, “Diverimento for Maimba and Alto Saxophone” by Akira Yuyama, “Time for Marimba” by Minoru Miki, and “Two movements “ by Toshimitsu Tanaka were composed around that time.

Famous pieces “Concerto “ and “Marimba Spiritual” by Minoru Miki, “Mirage” by Yasuo Sueyoshi and “From 5 Pieces after Paul Klee” by Toshiya Sukegawa were also written, These pieces are treasured today as one of classical repertoires around the world.

Japanese classical music entered the age of Contemporary Music.

Marimba became popular in the world contemporary music globally. Keiko Abe was active also as a composer and soon was the leader in the international world of marimba.

