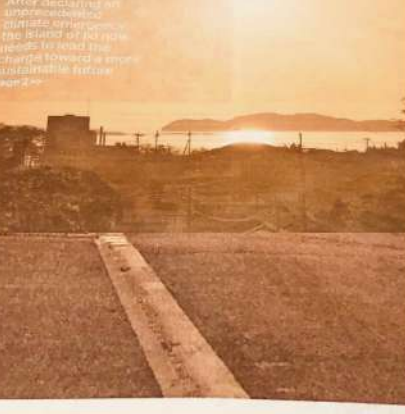


THE CLIMATE CRISIS
EMERGENCY ON 'LUCKY ISLAND'



Lifestyle: Why Did You Leave Japan?
Composer Motoki Hirai looks to spread the power of music **Page 13**



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Why Did You Leave Japan? by Louise George Kittaka

Motoki Hirai: Spreading the power of music

Musician Hirai travels the world to promote Japanese culture.

Growing up in a family of professional musicians where everyone could play at least two instruments, it is hardly surprising that Motoki Hirai became a concert pianist and composer. However, Hirai has expanded his horizons well beyond the realm of conventional performances, with music facilitating his participation in a variety of cultural, philanthropic and international exchange activities.

Hirai's father, Takachiro, is a professional cellist and his late grandfather, Kazuburo, was a well-known composer. Moreover, his mother is a pianist and his brother a conductor, while his grandmother was a violinist. "We were so lucky to have lived together with our grandparents. We learned a lot from them. Music was just everywhere — it was like the air we breathe or having a meal," he says of his childhood.

While the piano is Hirai's main instrument of choice these days, the violin was his first love and he recalls his debut solo public performance at the age of 3. He performed a piece chosen by his grandfather, the British national anthem "God Save the Queen." This seems quite fitting in hindsight, given that England became his second home.

Hirai says there was no pressure from his family to pursue a musical path in life, and he was encouraged to try a variety of activities, including sports. However, during his senior year at university in Japan, he made up his mind to follow in the family's footsteps and seek a career as a professional musician.

It was the distinguished British pianist Frank Wibaut who inspired Hirai to move to England in 1996. After hearing Hirai perform in Tokyo, Wibaut invited him to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where Wibaut was teaching at the time. London has been Hirai's professional base ever since, and the launch pad for a career that has seen him tour some 70 countries.

One particular performance that Hirai says was seminal for him was a recital he gave in 2005 in London as part of the EU-Japan Year of People-to-People



Profile

Name: Motoki Hirai
Profession: Concert pianist and composer
Hometown: Tokyo
Age: 46
Key moments in life and career:
1994 — Begins activities as an "artistic emissary" for the Japanese government
1996 — Graduates with a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from Keio University
1998 — Begins postgraduate studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London
2009 — Performs as part of the EU-Japan Year of People-to-People Exchanges in London
2010 — Following his marriage, moves to the English countryside in Surrey
2011 — Performs a solo recital debut at New York's Carnegie Hall
2014 — Begins a concert series with The Royal Marsden Cancer Charity
2015 — Performs at Expo Milano 2015 as an artistic director and composer
2019 — Becomes a goodwill ambassador for the Reviving Old Inari Porcelain at London's Castle Asura project
Favorite piece of music: "That's a tough one, since I have so many favorite composers and pieces of music, but if I have to choose one, it would be the piece I am playing at the time."

'I love playing for children in schools and hospitals ... the inspiration and emotional rewards are enormous.'

Motoki Hirai

Exchanges. Among the pieces he performed was one of his own compositions. "It was probably the turning point for my career both as a pianist and composer," he says. "The aim was to promote a greater mutual understanding of European and Japanese society and culture."

While Hirai treasures his Japanese culture, these days he sees himself as more of a global citizen, saying, "Obviously, I identify myself as Japanese, but I do feel that I am cosmopolitan, rather than bound by one country." Spending time in London, he explains, has facilitated this, offering relatively easy access to the majority of the world's regions, along with a multicultural environment.

"It sounds like a cliché, but London is indeed one of the greatest melting pots in the world," he says. "I find that I feel more cosmopolitan when in London." Since his senior year of college in Tokyo, Hirai has been traveling the world as an "artistic emissary" for the Japanese government, promoting Japanese music and culture through piano concerts and various outreach programs. One memorable experience he mentions took place in 2010, when he performed at a concert to mark the 10th anniversary of the Sugihara House museum in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Sugihara House honors the life of Chiune Sugihara (1900-86), a Japanese government official who was working in Kaunas during World War II and is credited with helping some 6,000 Polish Jews escape Europe. Sugihara issued transit visas, allowing them to travel through Japanese territory on their way to safe havens abroad. Four elderly women who were among those helped by Sugihara attended the 2010 concert.

"One after another, they started sobbing during my performance. They had miraculously survived, but they had lost their relatives and friends in Poland," recalls Hirai, adding that he will never forget the raw emotions he witnessed at the event.

Hirai is passionate about using the power of music to heal, and since 2014 he has been involved with The Royal Marsden Cancer Charity. He gives concerts in aid of child cancer patients, as well as visiting Royal Marsden Hospital in London to perform directly for the young patients. Coincidentally, he remembers once having the fortune to meet Diana, Princess of Wales, who he recalls spoke kindly to him after one of his performances during his student days in London.



Musical travel: Motoki Hirai takes part in a drumming jam session with local musicians during a trip to Zanzibar, Tanzania.

COURTESY OF MOTOKI HIRAI