

'As featured in Gramophone November 2021' (uploaded with kind permission from Gramophone)

CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS

Dai Fujikura

Richard Whitehouse surveys the diverse, absorbing output of this sought-after figure who made his mark post-millennium

Born in Japan, educated in the UK, long resident in London, his music performed across Europe and the US – Dai Fujikura is the epitome of a composer whose international outlook might detract from his music's personal and intriguing synthesis of Japanese idioms, ancient or modern, but heard from the vantage of one who early on absorbed the essence of the European classical tradition. This goes some way to explaining why he is now among the most prolific (almost 200 works to date) and commissioned composers of his generation.

Few of Fujikura's works prior to the turn of the millennium have been published, but *Still Sweet ...*, for mezzo, flute and viola, which exists in two versions, one from 1998 without words and the other from 2006 to words by Harry Ross (who has remained a regular collaborator), offers pointers to the future composer in its care for textural balance and timbral finesse. Among the most striking of his earlier works is *Fifth Station* (2003-04, rev 2008), commissioned by the London Sinfonietta, in which onstage cello and trumpet are gradually overwhelmed and then engulfed by eight instruments situated around the auditorium in a process of visual as well as aural immediacy.

'Phantom Pulse' is suffused with a timbral resonance poised unerringly between occidental and oriental archetypes

Nor is there any lack of impact in the visceral ensemble piece *Abandoned Time* (2004, rev 2006), with its imaginative deployment of electric guitar (archetypal rock gestures not excluded). If the percussion writing of *Phantom Pulse* (2006) is more overtly redolent of post-war models, the latter stages are suffused with a timbral resonance poised unerringly between occidental and oriental archetypes – an amalgamation that Fujikura has pursued in numerous subsequent works. Nor is humour absent from his music: witness *Time Unlocked* (2007), written for the 30th anniversary of Ensemble Intercontemporain, with its division of the instrumental sextet into complementary halves to create the illusion of a super-piano that resonates as if from above. Different again as to its underlying conception is *Secret Forest* (2008, rev 2009), whose resourceful combination of strings and wind – physically divided between the stage and auditorium in live performance – effects a keenly imaginative and frequently claustrophobic sound world.

Although they had collaborated on previous occasions, Fujikura did not compose a piece for the New York- and Chicago-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) until the appropriately named *Ice* (2009-10). This takes as its starting point the sounds of dust blowing and ice sheets



The already prolific Fujikura has plenty of new music in the pipeline

cracking in music whose atmospheric writing for solo strings and wind – notably bass flute at the close – is enhanced by the scintillating patina of handheld percussion in its earlier stages. In many respects, it provides the template for the ensemble works of the following decade.

The *Okeanos* cycle (2001-10) was – at the time – the composer's most ambitious attempt at a cultural synthesis that brings oboe, clarinet and viola into productive relationship with sho and koto, their respectively strident and ethereal tones adding much to the interplay of the finale with its subtle evocation of musical otherness. *Grasping* (2011) is an arresting contribution to the medium of string orchestra in its exchange between solo and *tutti* textures, as though viewing a flock of birds as an undifferentiated entity but also as individuals in methodical formation. Finesse, whether as textural or expressive component, is uppermost in *Sparkling Orbit* (2013) with its evocative interaction between electric guitar and live electronics – the latter a component to which Fujikura has often had recourse in subsequent pieces for orchestra or large ensemble.

While he has written on various occasions for orchestra, more prominent in Fujikura's output is a series of concertos – a genre for which the composer readily admits a predilection – that takes in almost all the standard instruments (not least double bass) and demonstrates an acute sense of how they might function within a *concertante* context. Those for flute (2015) and cello (2016-17) seem likely to become part of the modern repertoire, while the five instrumental soloists highlighted in *Mina* (2011-12) unfold a singular –

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FUJIKURA FACTS

1977 Born Osaka, Japan, April 27
1992 Moves to UK to study at Dover College in Kent
1998 Wins first prize in Kazimierz Serocki International Composers' Competition, Warsaw
2000 Completes BMus with Daryl Runswick at Trinity College of Music, London; then goes on to study for MMus with Edwin Roxburgh at Royal College of Music, London
2004 RPS Composition Prize
2006 Awarded composition PhD, King's College London; studied with George Benjamin
2007 Wins Paul Hindemith Prize of the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, Germany
2014-17 Composer-in-residence at Nagoya PO, Japan
2015 Premiere of first opera, *Solaris*, at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, March 5
2017 Awarded Silver Lion for innovation in music at Venice Biennale; appointed artistic director of Born Creative Festival at Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre
2018 Portrait Concert: Wigmore Hall, London, February 17
2018 Premiere of 'opera for a young audience' *The Gold-Bug* at Theater Basel, March 9
2020 Premiere of opera *A Dream of Armageddon* at New National Theatre, Tokyo, November 14

and singularly personal – take on the sinfonia concertante model.

The four piano concertos afford a plausible overview of Fujikura's evolution this past decade. The first, *Ampere* (2008), written for Noriko Ogawa, comprises five continuous sections exploring both the possibilities and inherent difficulties in combining the piano with an orchestra: any direct confrontation is avoided in favour of a fluid integration taking in an eventful cadenza before the heady orchestral response, then a final 'reconciliation' where the composer's experience of electronics is borne out in this music's gradual and alluring evanescence. The second piano concerto, *Diamond Dust* (2012), for Ellen Ugelvik, approaches this medium very differently through pitting soloist against a small yet diverse ensemble for what becomes the exploration of a harmonic field that is transformed and often distorted before arriving at the most capricious of stalemates.

Impulse (2017-18), the third piano concerto, written for Yu Kosuge, utilises classical forces but otherwise marks

the return to a larger, even confrontational, discourse whereby the orchestra has a continual sequence of responses to gestures issuing from the pianist – the emphasis being on a spontaneity that keeps the dialogue sounding unpredictable through to its volatile and not a little jazz-inflected cadenza, then teasing coda. A methodical yet never systematic approach is further pursued in the fourth concerto, *Akiko's Piano* (2019), dedicated to Martha Argerich and premiered by Mami Hagiwara. It takes as its basis the final hours of a child victim of Hiroshima in oblique terms suddenly made explicit when the cadenza is performed – as instructed in the score – by an upright piano similar to that on which she (Akiko) enjoyed playing. Akiko's actual piano, which miraculously survived the bomb, was played at the premiere.

If the more immediately expressive manner of this last piece was in part determined by the subject that inspired it, such has been evident in Fujikura's music this past decade – not least his first opera, *Solaris* (2013-14). The libretto by Saburo Teshigawara (who also directed the premiere in Paris, 2015) takes as its basis the novel by Stanisław Lem that similarly inspired Andrei Tarkovsky's film of four decades earlier, but the present adaptation is arguably closer to its source through eschewing overt sci-fi trappings in favour of that dislocation

between people – moreover, within individuals – which results from cultural and social alienation. A significant feature is instrumentation for an ensemble that comprises just 14 players, to which live electronics provide an imaginative enhancement and open out those atmospheric possibilities of the acoustic ambience. Subsequently staged in Augsburg in 2018, *Solaris* is likely to be one of a select number of operas from the early 21st century which enjoys repeated revival – a tribute to the potency of its subject as well as the immediacy of its musical idiom.

Having duly written an opera 'for a young audience' after Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Gold-Bug* (2017) and a full-length stage work after HG Wells's short story *A Dream of Armageddon* (2018-19), Fujikura is currently planning an opera on the life of the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai – while commissions are in hand for both a concerto for two orchestras and a double concerto for flute and violin. It is to be hoped that some of his more recent works will find their way to performances in the UK, where his music has arguably received less than its due (not forgetting a notable portrait concert at Wigmore Hall). Fortunate, then, that the extent of its recorded coverage, not least on the composer's own label Minabel, ensures listeners can access a more than representative overview of his diverse and absorbing output. **G**
 For further information see daifujikura.com plus extensive interviews with Fujikura online, including on YouTube

FUJIKURA ON DISC

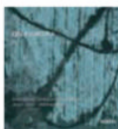
Representing just a portion of the recorded riches



Eternal Escape. Okeanos. Phantom Pulse. Rubi(co)n. Secret Forest

Adrian Bradbury *vc* Okeanos; Art Respirant / Ken Takaseki; Lucerne Festival Percussion Group / Michel Cerutti
 NMC (12/12)

This portrait surveying Fujikura's first decade of creative maturity features performances of unstinting commitment and attentiveness, with evocative booklet artwork by Natalie Braune



Abandoned Time. Ice. I Dreamed on Singing Flowers. Phantom Splinter. Sparking Orbit. Sparks

International Contemporary Ensemble / Jayce Ogren, Matthew Ward
 Kairos

His more experimental pieces are collected here, each underlining the panache and finesse conjured from across the instrumental spectrum, all heard in suitably dedicated performances.



Calling. Fifth Station. Grasping. Time Unlocked. Vanishing Point

Prague Modern / Pascal Gallois *bn*
 Stradivarius (4/15)

This finely conceived anthology of pieces – deftly eliding the boundary between large ensemble and chamber orchestra – consolidated Fujikura's reputation at the start of the 2010s.



Deliquesce. Diamond Dust. Double Bass Concerto. Korokoro. Line by Line. Yurayura

Reison Kuroda *shakuhachi* Nobuaki Fukukawa *hn* William Lang *tn* Mei Yi Foo *pf* Viktoria Mullova *vn* Yoji Sato *db*
 Ensemble Nomad / Kenichi Nakagawa, Norio Sato

Minabel

Over the past eight years, Fujikura has been issuing music on his own label. This 2018 release is typical in covering a broad range of genres, its focal point being the piano concerto *Diamond Dust*.