

# The Great Wave behind the scenes

Bringing a world premiere opera – and an iconic shade of blue – to life

When making a new production, opera companies often have to contend with music their audience will already know from advertisements, pop culture, or previous trips to the theatre. This is not a problem for a world premiere like *The Great Wave*, where everyone will hear the music for the first time in February 2026. However, even if people don't know the name Katsushika Hokusai, they will almost certainly be familiar with his iconic prints, not least *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. How do you design an opera around an instantly and almost-universally recognisable piece of art, one on t-shirts, tote bags, notebooks, napkins, and more?

The talented artisans at Scottish Opera's workshops have been hard at work not only finding the perfect shades to replicate Prussian Blue under the stage lights but also – under guidance of Scenographer Junpei Kiz, Costume Designer Kayo Takahashi Deschene, Lighting Designer Yuka Hisamatsu, Props Designer Eri Fukasawa, and Video Designer Sho Yamaguchi – to find ways to reinterpret *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and Hokusai's other works for the Theatre Royal Glasgow and Festival Theatre Edinburgh.

## THE GREAT WAVE

### An old flute for a new opera

The unique sounds of the Japanese shakuhachi flute are unmistakable and familiar to many, but it is much less common to hear one alongside a full operatic orchestra! Composer Dai Fujikura talks about how the shakuhachi flute fits into the sound world of *The Great Wave*.

#### What is a shakuhachi?

The shakuhachi is a Japanese instrument constructed from a single piece of madake bamboo, typically measuring 54.5cm (for the standard pitch). It features five finger holes – four on the front and one thumb hole on the back. Unlike Western flutes, the player blows across the open end rather than into a mouthpiece.

The instrument's unique construction allows for an extraordinary range of expression that you cannot get from other woodwinds. The bamboo's natural nodes and the hand-carved bore create subtle variations in timbre, while the player can produce microtonal inflections by partially covering holes and adjusting embouchure and breath pressure.

#### What does the shakuhachi sound like?

Because of the inflections, breath sounds, microtonal bends, and haunting glissandi, notes can seem to slide together like mist. It is an instrument that doesn't just play music; it sighs, whispers, and sometimes even seems to meditate. The instrument allows me to write music that can be both incredibly intimate and powerfully dramatic. One moment it can sound like a solitary monk practicing in a mountain temple; the next it can cut through a full orchestra with a raw, almost primal energy.

#### The shakuhachi in *The Great Wave*

Shozan Hasegawa will play the shakuhachi in The Orchestra of Scottish Opera. In this opera, the shakuhachi appears at three key moments, including at the opening and a climactic moment towards the opera's end. But you'll have to buy tickets to find out what is happening! What I can say is that, in these scenes, the shakuhachi acts as a bridge between the real and the imaginary – between the human and the spiritual.

In *The Great Wave*, I am excited to hear how the ancient voice of the shakuhachi dances with The Orchestra of Scottish Opera. The shakuhachi does not compete with the other instruments; it has a conversation with them, sometimes agreeing, sometimes questioning, always bringing this sense of timeless wisdom that feels both deeply Japanese and utterly universal.

*The Great Wave*: see page 27 for dates and booking information.

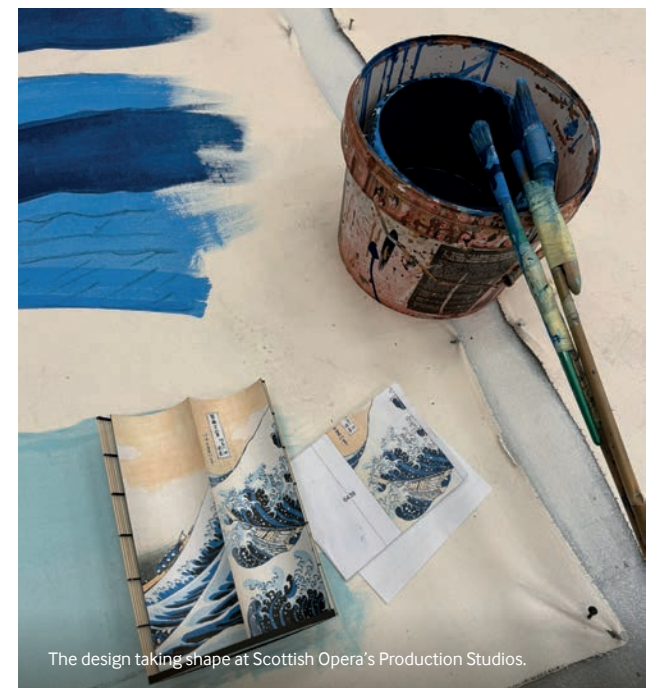
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Shozan Hasegawa holding a shakuhachi.



Head of Production Niall Black (right) shows a model of *The Great Wave* during a production tour on Doors Open Day (see page 13).



The design taking shape at Scottish Opera's Production Studios.