HYBRID OF EAST AND WEST

ANDREW CLARK INTRODUCES AN OPERATIC 'GREAT WAVE'

It was a casual encounter. Dai Fujikura, a Japanese composer long resident in the UK, was invited to a private view of the British Museum's landmark 2017 exhibition devoted to the early 19th-century artist Katsushika Hokusai. 'I only knew the name and the one picture,' says Fujikura, 48, referring to the woodblock print *Under the Great Wave off Kanagawa* (popularly known as 'The Great Wave')—the single work that has made Hokusai the most celebrated Japanese artist of all time. As Fujikura admits, 'Just because you're Japanese doesn't mean you know all about Hokusai.' When he and his Bulgarian wife Milena saw the exhibition, they were astonished by the range and quality of Hokusai's images, most of them prints made from woodblocks. On their way out, Fujikura bought the illustrated monograph that the British Museum had published to coincide with the show. Back at their south London home, looking through the book, 'my wife told me, "You should write an opera about Hokusai's life."'

Fast-forward nearly ten years, and Fujikura's opera *The Great Wave* is about to be premiered by Scottish Opera. There will be two performances in Glasgow and two in Edinburgh, with the near-certainty of a transfer to Japan—possibly at the New National Theatre in Tokyo where, six years ago, Fujikura's H.G. Wells opera

Librettist and composer of 'The Great Wave': Harry Ross and Dai Fujikura

Katsushika Hokusai's most famous image, 'Under the Great Wave of Kanagawa'

A Dream of Armageddon was premiered and enthusiastically received (February 2021, pp. 197-200).

In a production supported by the Japanese government's Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Japan Arts Council and the promoter Kajimoto, *The Great Wave* will be staged by the visionary actor and director Satoshi Miyagi and conducted by Scottish Opera's music director, Stuart Stratford. The libretto is by Harry Ross, a Scot with whom Fujikura has collaborated regularly since the late 1990s, when they were music undergraduates in London.

The opera is a five-act dramatization of Hokusai's career. It describes how, despite the vicissitudes of life, including multiple bereavements and natural disasters, an artist holds true to his ideals and dies in old age, his gaze unremittingly focused on perfection. Although many aspects of Hokusai's biography remain a sketch, there are enough known details—about his family relationships, his peripatetic existence, his pioneering use of Prussian Blue pigment—to give the composer and librettist a working framework, which they have fleshed out imaginatively and succinctly with fictionalized scenes.

Chief among these are two dream sequences. In the first act, Hokusai imagines himself to be in a storm-tossed boat off Kanagawa, riding out a freak wave with Mount Fuji in the distance—the scene immortalized in his woodblock print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. In a second dream, near the end of the opera, the artist encounters a tiger and a dragon. Far from being agents of hostility and threat as in Western tradition, they symbolize wisdom, good fortune and protection (a role they play in Buddhist shrines), prompting Hokusai to reflect on his artistic destiny.

Self-portrait of the artist as an old man: Katsushika Hokusai in the 1840s

Along the way we are left in no doubt that, in contrast to his idealism and remarkable industry, Hokusai was a man of flesh and blood, enjoying earthy humour and always alert to the commercial appeal of his work. The challenge facing both composer and librettist with *The Great Wave* was to balance these contrasting elements in a way that would 'deal with the myth and the ordinary human being at the same time,' says Fujikura. 'Hokusai is a historical archetype who led an action-packed life that we can identify with.'

A glance through the operatic repertoire suggests that life stories of great visual artists do not lend themselves easily to the lyric theatre: they are more interesting because of the people and scenes they portray in brushstrokes, than for the detail of the artist's own life. Hokusai does not match this template.

While little is known about any romantic associations he may have had, it is well established that he had a turbulent existence. Both his wives and two of his children predeceased him. He was struck by lightning at the age of 50 and suffered a stroke which, at 60, required him to relearn his art. He was forced to pay off his grandson's gambling debts. A fire in 1839 destroyed all his studio work. He was the opposite of the Romantic European artist, in that he had a cheery disposition. Despite setbacks, he continued to paint until the very end, sustained by his positive outlook and the love of his artist-daughter Ōi, to whom Fujikura and Ross give a prominent role in *The Great Wave*.

Hokusai died in 1849 at what was, by 19th-century standards, the exceptionally ripe age of 88, having spent his entire life in a country isolated from most outside influences. He was renowned as much for his popular touch—cited in *The Great Wave*'s opening and closing acts—as for the cross-cultural appeal of his works, which influenced Van Gogh and Monet during the craze for *Japonisme* that swept late 19th-century Europe. In short, while Hokusai was never destined to become one of opera's tragic anti-heroes, his life had 'operatic' qualities.

Hokusai's art is now part of international culture, instantly recognizable in emojis and wall-posters. What Fujikura and Ross have plugged into is the fact that Hokusai himself—man, father, painter—possesses the same supra-national appeal, transcending the boundaries of race, time and geography. In their bio-opera, Hokusai represents humanity's indomitable spirit and restless creative quest.

The Great Wave adds up to two hours of music. In Fujikura's words, it required 'a lot of heavy lifting'—by which he means not so much the creative slog, more the task of securing enough backers to justify the time and effort it would take to flesh out a synopsis into a full-length score, with the promise of performance. 'It took seven years,' says Fujikura, a voluble and lively conversationalist. 'We pitched everywhere and then came Covid. There were a lot of rejections, but I'm like an animal who doesn't let go once it's bitten something. Harry introduced us to Scottish Opera, and the Japanese Ministry of Culture said, "Please go ahead". We got the green light in May 2024 for a February 2026 premiere—a crazy timeline, but we had already developed the proposal into a plot synopsis, and I knew we could make it work. Back in 2018, when Harry and I originally agreed to do it, we were lucky to meet Tim Clark [a world-renowned Hokusai scholar, at that time head of the Japanese section of the British Museum's Department of Asia]. He was excited about our plans and helped us in our research. Without the British Museum, there would be no opera.'

Even before he was consulted, Clark had unwittingly provided the spark of motivation that lit Fujikura's creative fires. 'Around the time of the exhibition,' Fujikura recalls, 'I saw a BBC programme about Hokusai, in which Tim was captured on film reacting to the arrival of a group of Hokusai pictures at the British Museum. It was clear that, at that moment, he was really moved. He had first seen Hokusai's paintings at school, and it changed his life. Watching his spontaneous reaction was important for me—to see a British guy from Stevenage, not a showy person, inadvertently demonstrating the power Hokusai could exert two centuries later. That's what made me want to do the opera.'

When asked whether, with its orchestra, chorus and soloists, *The Great Wave* amounts to a traditional proscenium-arch grand opera, Fujikura argues that it is a bit like himself—a hybrid of East and West. Born in Osaka in 1977 to non-musical parents, he started piano lessons aged five and began composing at eight. 'I learned my Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart and Bach, but I was always cutting or changing bits and improvising—"making it better". My piano teacher, who was very correct, told me off. My mother couldn't understand: "What's wrong with my son?" I didn't conform like everybody else. At eight I had a revelation: I got told off only when I did things differently from the score. If I composed the score myself, then I would always be "right"! That was my motivation—not "I love Beethoven, I want to be a composer." Once I started composing my own music, I couldn't believe what fun it was.'

At the age of 15 and with scarcely a word of English, Fujikura won a scholarship to Dover College, an independent co-educational school overlooking the English Channel, where for the next three years he was 'given full access to the keys to all music. For the first time I felt that doing music was very advantageous for my life.

There were strict boarding-school rules, but I was a good boy: I was the only one allowed to be myself. I didn't even have to queue for lunch. I was given a platform: "As long as you are useful to us [by giving performances that advertise the school's excellence], you can do whatever you want." I was a genuine curiosity.'

It is thanks to this privileged schooling that Fujikura believes he is capable of 'moving between the two cultures [of East and West] with incredible ease, because of music. Nowadays, when I go back to Japan for holidays, I meet up with my childhood schoolmates. They say I haven't changed—"You were always weird!".'

While still an undergraduate at Trinity College in London, Fujikura became the youngest composer ever to win the Serocki International Composers Competition, the first of a string of prizes and awards. He completed his training with Edwin Roxburgh at the Royal College of Music and George Benjamin at King's College, London, and soon began to receive wider recognition—a 2004 London Sinfonietta performance of *Fifth Station* (a student work demonstrating his command of instrumental gesture and texture), a 2005 Lucerne Festival commission conducted by Pierre Boulez, a 2006 BBC Proms performance of *Crushing Twister* and, in 2015, the premiere in Paris of *Solaris*, his first opera, composed with IRCAM resources.

Given the backing of such beacons of the musical avant-garde, it comes as a surprise to hear Fujikura articulating an arch-traditional view of opera—as an exercise in storytelling. 'I can tell everything in my notes. As a composer I love writing melodies: all the vocal lines are melodic.'

That bodes well for *The Great Wave* and its interpreters. Speaking on the strength of early rehearsals with the Orchestra of Scottish Opera, Stuart Stratford describes the opera as having a 'mosaic-like structure—the various sections have their own musical identity'. He cites a 'bare, tonal' style at the start, contrasting with later scenes that are 'quite dense, almost atonal and quasi-minimalist, with repeated rhythmic motifs. There's also good old-fashioned vocal writing: Dai understands the nature of each voice and has written well for it. The opera has plenty of lyrical opportunities, especially for Ōi,' the soprano role that features prominently in the opening and closing scenes, in which Stratford detects 'touching' father-daughter/baritone-soprano echoes of Verdi.

The structure of *The Great Wave* has been determined as much by its librettist as by its composer. Harry Ross's musical training and experience as an independent theatre producer have worked to the opera's benefit: the libretto is taut and concise, with singable lines that leave plenty of room for music to wield its expressive power. With a quarter-century of collaboration behind them, Ross and Fujikura have developed a near-symbiotic method of working, with the librettist taking on most of the heavy-duty research before adapting his suggestions to the composer's responses. They bring complementary tastes—Ross's more gritty aesthetic acting as a counterbalance to Fujikura's 'instincts'—but Ross acknowledges that he is 'very much the servant of it all. We go back and forth changing things, making sure the music is supported, getting the right balance between audibility and singability.'

It was Ross who suggested opening the opera with Ōi's preparation of her father's

funeral, rather than the thunderclap originally envisaged by Fujikura. 'It was a great idea,' Fujikura enthuses, 'because, although Hokusai is not there and we don't actually see him die, we establish in a single scene what kind of person he was—simultaneously the celebrity and the father, the myth and the ordinary human being. So Harry was right—and then we have the thunder.'

But in a move that represents a shift towards Japanese aesthetics in Fujikura's musical toolbox (hitherto dominated by Western instruments), he has given a starring role in the first and fifth acts to the shakuhachi, a traditional Japanese bamboo flute. As the orchestral musicians found, to their evident wonderment, during early rehearsals in Glasgow, the instrument immediately casts a spell on the soundworld of *The Great Wave*.

The shakuhachi was prevalent in Japan in Hokusai's lifetime (as it had been for centuries before), but the country's Westernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, known as the Meiji era, eroded traditional culture, and the post-1945 American occupation hastened the shakuhachi's decline in popularity. Ironically, it is now increasingly fashionable in the West—though a Japanese player, Shozan Hasegawa, is being flown in specially for the premiere performances of *The Great Wave*.

Fujikura is not new to the instrument. He first heard it at a music festival at Darmstadt a decade ago and has since written a shakuhachi concerto and other pieces. In contrast to the Western transverse (side-blown) flute, which uses multiple keys to create many pitches, the vertically held shakuhachi—a bit like a recorder with the head cut off, with only five holes—creates multiple colours around a single pitch. It has the breathiness of the human voice, simultaneously earthier and more otherworldly than the Western metal flute, and commands a subtler variety of sounds, all

'The Dream of Armageddon', Fujikura and Ross's previous collaboration at the New National Theatre, Tokyo, in 2020

The type of shakuhachi that will be showcased in 'The Great Wave' is a modern, lacquered version of the traditional Japanese bamboo flute. Known as jiari, it is louder and more consistent in sound than the instrument with which Hokusai would have been familiar. Comparison of the two mouthpieces suggests that the older version, known as jinashi, has the quirky, unvarnished character of a 'period' instrument

determined by movement of air on the mouthpiece. These characteristics have encouraged Fujikura to incorporate an element of improvisatory freedom in the shakuhachi part in *The Great Wave*, letting the player add decorations even while the pitches are specified in the score.

Francis Moore, a London-based shakuhachi player who took part in Scottish Opera's rehearsals and will cover for Hasegawa's performances, describes the sound as 'stranger and softer' than a conventional flute. 'The shakuhachi has been given its own personality in the opera'—an impression confirmed by Fujikura's decision to offer the production team the option of positioning the shakuhachi player on stage. 'In every phrase the player has the freedom to add whatever articulations he or she wishes. The composer has shown a strong sense of how the shakuhachi works, leaning into the flair the instrument has, in keeping with what it does best.'

Maybe this is how, in the context of a Western-style opera, Fujikura has chosen to assert his Japanese-ness. It should make for an intriguing experience. But exactly where *The Great Wave*'s aesthetic balance ultimately lies—culturally, spiritually, emotionally—will be up to audiences to decide.

'The Great Wave' opens at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on February 12, c. Stuart Stratford, d. Satoshi Miyagi, with Daisuke Ohyama as Hokusai and Julieth Lozano Rolong as Ōi. www.scottishopera.org.uk

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