

How I Came to Play Makiko Nishikaze's Pianopera I and II

The first time I heard Makiko Nishikaze's piano music was at a concert in Klangraum, Düsseldorf in 1999. What struck me most about it was its waywardness. In a kind of musical stream of consciousness, delicate melodic strands floated quietly and unpredictably over the entire keyboard like the disconnected thoughts of a daydreamer. And yet it sounded perfectly natural and inevitable: some mysterious logic was holding it all together. I began to think about how I would interpret this music.

The opportunity to do so came in 2002 when I was asked to do a series of six concerts for Klangraum. I decided to include an evening of Makiko Nishikaze's music and she entrusted me with the first performance of her recently completed 70 minute long "Piano Islands". My interpretation pleased her so much that she decided to compose a further piano piece, the two-part "Pianopera", especially for me.

Makiko Nishikaze dislikes technical discussions of her music. How it sounds, she says, is more important than how it's made. All she gives away is that she composes systematically, but her systems are flexible, and that the pitches, intervals and durations she uses are derived from sets of proportions. Before beginning "Pianopera I" she carefully measured the lengths of my arms and fingers, and these measurements provided the set of proportions for the piece. I was reminded of composers like Schumann and Ravel deriving themes from the letters of their dedicatees' names.

In 2003 Makiko Nishikaze was awarded a grant to work for three months at the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles. This beautiful residence overlooking the Pacific Ocean was once the home of the novelist Lion Feuchtwanger and, to judge by the photographs hanging on its walls, was frequented by many distinguished artists who, like him, were exiles from Nazi Germany, including such musical luminaries as Arnold Schoenberg and Otto Klemperer. While she was there I had the good fortune to be invited to come and give the first performance of "Pianopera I" and "Pianopera II". This took place on the 23rd of April in the library of the Villa Aurora on an old Blüthner grand piano that had once belonged to the composer Ernst Toch.

And what is the plot of this opera in two acts for piano? That's up to you, Dear Listener.

John McAlpine.