

Yukiko Takagi: “I Follow My Intuition...”

Beloved pianist Yukiko Takagi celebrates 27 years of bringing five centuries of music to TPC. Week in, week out, she soothes, provokes, consoles, and challenges her attentive listeners in the pews. One week it's Bach, the next, Chopin. Or ... Stockhausen.

How does she do it? How does Yukiko pull from her vast repertoire to match the music to the mood of the service? Music & Worship Committee member Diana Digges sat down with this remarkable artist that we are so lucky to have — how many churches can boast of having an avant-garde pianist? — and asked her about her process, her background, and her life.

Diana Digges: *With five-plus centuries of music in your hands, how do you decide what to play for a particular service?*

Yukiko Takagi: It's a very interesting thing. I follow my intuition, but it also depends on what else I'm thinking of. I may have heard a friend play Mompou, for example, and I think, Oh, I don't have any of this music! That one is nice, I want to play it. I buy the music, work it up, then the service bulletin comes my way....

A lot of times, it's sort of a lucky coincidence. Anne will tell me a particular mood — it has to be upbeat, for example.

DD: *I've noticed people not only clap at the end of the service in appreciation of your efforts, but also come up to share their reactions.*

YT: Yes! There is that triangle — we have the written music, then the performer, then we have an audience. Any one of them is a very important component. What has happened in the church that fascinates me is that you — you in the pews — connect the lines between the sermon topic and what you hear. You as an audience gain access to a hidden message of the composition. So it's not just my intention that I want to send something forth. It's about what people hear.

DD: *What is different, if anything, about playing in a "sacred space" and playing in Jordan Hall or another secular setting? I'm sure you know that for many congregants, your playing is as much a "sacred" anchor of the service as the sermon.*

YT: I understand that my function is different. I'm not just there to perform, I'm fitting into a larger context. People come to focus on a particular thought. I want to be sure that I



am fitting within my boundary; my playing has to be appropriate. There are some pieces, for example, I wouldn't play.

DD: *So let's take Stockhausen. Let's go back to what people hear. You have been introducing us to this composer by playing a part of his massive "Klang" cycle each week in preparation for a concert in Montreal at the end of February. People hear very different things. One person, for example, said he heard geometry — "Triangles and squared-off edges and exclamation points." Another heard "shattering glass— Kristallnacht."*

YT: Yes. If people ask me about what the composer intended, it's never a yes or no question — I may feel sure [that what they heard] had nothing to do with what Stockhausen had in mind, but that doesn't make it invalid. That's the beauty of music. It's up to you what you're going to receive.

DD: *How did this Stockhausen project evolve?*

YT: Two and a half years ago, I was hired to play a cycle of *Klang*, which means sound in German — a cycle of pieces very typical of Stockhausen's work. Huge structure. Stockhausen is a little bit of an egomaniac. He assigns different instruments to the hours of the day. The piano is the tenth hour. There's also a color chart, that goes from yellow to green to blue associated with each hour. So you have this musical description of 24 hours, and each hour has a different instrument.

The whole cycle is written in such a way that it takes over two hours to perform. The piano part is called "natural duration" and the idea is that you're hearing a sound and how it decays. You hear one sound. Then another. Very slow and very spare. Then you hear the different idea of it as the music progresses. The core idea is the birth and decay of the sound.

DD: *And you're performing "Klang" in Montreal later this winter, is that right?*

YT: Yes. February 28 and March 1 in Montreal. And I'll give a concert of the entire work at TPC sometime in the spring.

Anne is behind me on this Stockhausen project, by the way. She feels strongly that we shouldn't just do what's easy. It's good to be challenged.

DD: *Where else do you perform?*

Stephen [Yukiko's husband Stephen Drury, the eminent pianist, conductor, and champion of contemporary music] and I run the Callithumpian Consort—

DD: *And Callithumpian means...?*

YT: “Happy noise-making.” Originally, it referred to bringing cans to bang on at weddings, to “thump on them” — that lowers the bar, doesn’t it! Steve came across the word and thought it was perfect. We’re anywhere from two to 20 people. We’ve played abroad a few times, and just played a concert in Mexico. Several times in Jordan Hall.

One of the most important things we do is known as “Sick Puppy” [*SICPP* — for the *Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice*, <http://sicpp.org>] — seven days of contemporary concerts and lessons. Performers and composers come from all over the world. Steve matches the right people with the right pieces. Then, we have a concert. An “Iditarod” — eight or nine hours of music! We’re kind of riffing on the whole “Sick Puppy” idea ... everything we do is dog-related. [*The Iditarod is an annual long-distance sled-dog race in Alaska.*]

DD: *You have introduced us to many modern composers. Besides Stockhausen, who are some of your favorites?*

YT: My favorites? Most recent, Julian Anderson — a Sick Puppy guest last year. Or Georg Friedrich Haas, who does microtonal music.

DD: *Can you explain a bit about how that works?*

YT: There is a staircase of sound inside a piano, if you like. We’re used to tuning of octaves of 12 pitches, from C to C [*known as equal temperament*]. But the sound is a slope, so you can find a sound anywhere in between. Haas devises his own tuning system — much finer than 12-tone. Steve played this Haas piece where he had to play two pianos that are tuned differently, which is extremely difficult.

Steve and I together have played the two pianos tuned differently. We come to get to know that world, hearing things differently. At first, it sounds out of tune, then you realize this sound has this particular color, that one has something else. As a musician, we associate harmony change with a color change, so it’s interesting to be exposed to an unbelievable amount of music tuned differently. The palette is a whole lot wider. Almost a visceral experience.

DD: *Is that what draws you to contemporary music? That newness of experience?*

YT: I’ve always liked being exposed to things that I haven’t heard before. When I was younger, I liked the sense of freedom in it. Not that it was uncharted territory, but you weren’t trying to model yourself after a particular performer or interpreter. There was a lot more room for discovery. A lot of your own work you have to do. I might think, this harmony is interesting if I voice it *this way*. Lots of things that are very fresh to me. That’s why I like to leap about!

DD: *You were born in Fujisawa, near Tokyo, and you came to study as an undergrad at New England Conservatory. Was contemporary music your passion then?*

YT: At the time I was interested in becoming a composition major. I was very green! I liked the idea of being an intellectual. I think I was very lazy, I didn't want to be a slave at the piano ... composition had an intellectual allure.

But I ended up with a degree in piano performance, Then I took a year off, then I returned for a master's in piano performance.

DD: *You play a lot of Bach for us — so different from Stockhausen!*

YT: Yes. Bach is always good to go back to; something about him is very cleansing, I think. The music is very abstract, yet interesting in what he does with the manipulation of the notes— you can marvel at the whole construction of it, but you can also just get into how the notes are moving. The sixteenth note goes this way and that way and it makes this shape. I like the process of working through it.

DD: *Do you teach as well as perform?*

YT: Yes, children and adults. I enjoy teaching immensely! It poses an element of problem-solving: What are these fingers not doing? What is this brain not understanding? What are these ears not hearing? All kinds of different answers — from piano pedagogy to psychology. There are a lot of different elements. Fascinating.

DD: *How many hours a day do you practice?*

YT: Five hours. I should be doing seven! I still struggle with being lazy. I like to set myself goals and deadlines and performances so that I have to work. I'm very dedicated to exercises. I take barre classes and karate in Brookline. I have a black belt. Barre classes capture some of the elements of ballet, a lot of isometrics. I like the sense I'm getting stronger!

DD: *A black belt! That strength does come through in your physical engagement with the piano. Many of us marvel at it.*

Yukiko, we know we are lucky to have you at TPC and we want more people to come through our doors to hear you play. Some may know lots about your repertoire, others may know nothing. Do you think it is helpful to share information about the composer from the pulpit?

YT: It makes it more real. It's always a good idea to have a little bit of information to make it more personal. ... I enjoy playing at the church. And I'm lucky I have an intelligent and inquiring audience to play for!