



La Cúpula, the perfect venue for Tomoko Mukaiyama's piano recital (Photo: Facebook)

The Yucatan Times is the only local media that had an exclusive interview with talented artist Tomoko Mukaiyama.

Tomoko Mukaiyama has a sweet and smooth voice, soft but persuasive at the same time... somehow when she talks, people listen.

Sitting with her on a sunny Mérida afternoon by the swimming pool, you cannot even imagine that she actually is not only one of the most prestigious interpreters of the piano today, but one of the most original and unique as well.

The first question that TYT made to her was a simple one:

TYT: What is your definition of music? And her answer was prompt:

“I will make a quotation of one of my friends that is a composer, actually everything is music, and this could come as a little bit abstract, but what he meant is that music is about making a link with everything... to link note to note, instrument to instrument, musician to musician but most of all, music is about connecting people.

It connects the author with the interpreter; the interpreter with the audience, the audience with themselves and also it connects space to space and time to time. In that way, music is everything.

And silence, silence is also music, that’s a known fact ... so music is about time, silence and connection... everything that surrounds us has to do with music in one way or the other...”



Tomoko Muakaiyama (Photo: by Takashi Kawashima)

TYT: We know that music is a big part of your life, can you tell us how did you decide to dedicate your life to music?

“For the last ten years or so, I have not been making that many concerts, because lately I have been very excited about visual arts, installation, video, theater and other forms of art, but music has been always there, because at doing concerts, somehow gives me the feeling that I can grab people, that I can grab deep into them, I can get people to express feelings that they’re actually hiding, I feel I can take this out of them, it’s like a confrontation...

And that’s the core of my work, whatever I do, is it dance, theater or installation, the power of music is the base of all my work.

And also, whether it’s music or installation, it is all about you, it’s not about who is playing, but it is all about you, the audience is the receiver, the most important, and so my work is about YOU not about ME...”



Tomoko Mukaiyama (Photo: Philip Mechanicus)

TYT: And now that you mention that, we come right into the next question: Who is Tomoko?

“Yeah! Who is she? ... I don’t know! I left Japan 25 years ago, and I always carry the Japanese spirit, but I am also very European, I love living in the Netherlands, the country and the culture, I like it very much. But I feel there are very important things that you cannot leave behind, that I think I learned in Japan.

I could be a very complex person in both positive and negative ways, I am a person with many layers... And I am also very curious, that’s why I don’t stick only to piano, but I like to experiment with other forms of art.

I don’t want to be on a podium all the time, as you know a piano has 88 keys, and at some point I thought: Is this all? And so I wanted to go a little bit around the instrument, and I started dancing, and incorporating other elements, such as video; but it was the curiosity that made me start to wonder what is it out there? What is out there beyond Japan, beyond Amsterdam? And somehow that is how I started traveling and came to Merida.

Also every time I meet new people, I make new friends, and that brings me new inspiration.

I think it was about 20 years ago, I was working with a theater director, he was making this very radical piece, and he said to me: every time you end up an act, you bow like this, so next time you bow, why don't you move your arm in a different way and then bow.

And so I did, and this apparently insignificant change, shifted the whole concept and the whole meaning to that particular concert. So that made me realize that it is the small things that make the difference in the way the audience understands your work.



Tomoko Mukaiyama Visual Artist (Photo: MIBF)

For instance, I did this project called "For You", it was very simple, it was just a normal piano concert, but there were two features that distinguished it from a regular presentation: number one is that it only lasts 15 minutes; and number two is the fact that the audience is just one person, that's why it is called "For You".

So, can you imagine? You go alone into this big hall or theater, and you sit in front of the artist all by yourself, nobody else in there but you and me... it is scary, because in a way it is a shock, the pianist comes in, and what do you do?"

TYT: Applaud?

"Yes, but do you stand up, or remain seated? Do you smile or not? Do you say something or keep quiet? The whole context is kind of odd, people take different decisions... and also, the concert may be good, but since you are the only one in there, it is all up to you to decide..."

Imagine, if you were not there, that will change the entire thing... if you 're not there, there is no concert, although the pianist is performing, if there is no audience, there is no concert."

TYT: So you played for a one person audience?

“Yes, I did that maybe 200 times.”

TYT: How was that person selected?

“Just randomly, I mean they had to buy a ticket. And sometimes we did some kind of an auction, so it became pretty expensive to attend. We did “For You” in the Netherlands, Canada and also in Japan.”

TYT: Is there some kind of video or photographs of those concerts?

“No, I decided not to document it, precisely because it is about you, that’s why it’s “For You,” and it is your own personal concert, you take it with you, and we decided not to document it because it is not to be shared, the experience is all yours.”

TYT: How long ago was that?

“We did it like ten or twelve years ago... but I wanted to talk about this, because you see, it is very simple, it is a concert, and it makes you think, what is music? Who are you? Who am I? Those are two questions raised by this “For You” concept.”



Tomoko Mukaiyama (Photo: Shinji Otani)

TYT: Do you always involve music in your visual art or installation pieces?

“Most of the time yes, for example, we did this installation in Amsterdam, it was only a space with two pianos, and I called it the “dead pianos”, because we did it after a big Tsunami hit Japan, and these pianos were symbolically taken by the Tsunami and obviously you cannot play them anymore, since the water took away their legs, the chords were all broken and they were just wrecked.

TYT: You mentioned you left Japan at a young age

“Yes I think I was like 24, because I did conservatorium, masters, but I also went to music school in the United States, and then for one year in Amsterdam.”

TYT: Now that you mentioned all those countries, it is awesome to have you now here in Mérida, and so we want to ask you what do you think about Yucatan?

“Well throughout my life, since I left Japan, I had felt that there was something missing, and I feel that I just found it here in Yucatán. It was very clear to me that what I missed was really deep nature, lush vegetation, and also what I missed were gods (I mean, god with an s), and you have them here.

In the Yucatan jungle I feel the presence of these gods everywhere. I feel that nature is a super power. And this is something that I brought from Japan. This side of the world is quite similar to my hometown in Japan.”

TYT: How you like the weather here?

“For me this weather is interesting, I like it, I come from a very hot and humid country, so I’m used to it and I feel just like at home... also the plants and the animals here are just amazing.”

TYT: Talking about Mérida, what can you tell us about the Merida International Brass Festival? We want to know your opinion about it.

“I think it is a great idea to bring many world renown musicians, that play different instruments, make them interact with young students and also with each other, and obviously it is superb for these kids that get a chance to be lectured by these magnificent artists, and then have the chance to see them play every night during the Festival.

I consider Sam (Samuel Rafinesque) and the rest of the Merida International Brass Festival organizers truly visionaries.

They are doing a great job by using the power of music and they are connecting these world class musicians from different countries with young Mexican talents, and also with the local audience.

And once again, we get back to music, when you see these kind of events taking place, you realize that music goes beyond race, religion and nationality. And during these hard times our world is going through, music is a counterpoint to war and violence.”



Tomoko Mukaiyama at the inauguration of La Cupula
(Photo: MIBF)

TYT: Finally, our last question is what does Tomoko have to say to the people of Mexico?

“For me Mexican people is very positive, I feel I have a lot to learn from them. I think they are open to art. There is a rich culture in this country, and I would like to learn more about it.

I can feel that Mérida is open to art, I feel that this land of the Yucatan complements me in a way, people here share different values, and maybe I would consider moving here temporarily or even permanently.”

Later on that night, this reporter had the privilege to witness what soloist Tomoko Mukaiyama is capable of doing when she sits in front of a piano and before an audience.

Her work is just compelling... she started her act with a piece so powerful, that the audience did not even know what hit them.

The sound that came out of her instrument was so overwhelmingly loud and melodious at the same time, that most of the people in the room were forced to close their eyes while listening to her music, as if they were absolutely hypnotized.

On the following act Tomoko played in a solemn tone and the velvety strings of the piano chords made a delicate sound, that transported the audience to a beautiful and mesmerizing happy place.



Tomoko Mukaiyama and Jeff Smith (Photo: MIBF)

And to finish a memorable evening, Tomoko shared the stage with master tumpetist Jeff Smith, another of the Merida International Brass Festival special guests.

They interacted in such a sublime way, that the concert concluded with a standing ovation and people claiming for more... yelling: “otra, otra” in a warm Mexican way.

During that evening, people who attended the inauguration of “La Cúpula” Cultural Center, also had the opportunity to enjoy the magnificent talent of plastic artist Kimiko Yoshida.

But The Yucatan Times had an exclusive interview with her too, and will post a whole article regarding this subject later on this week, so keep tuned in...

For more than two decades now, Tomoko has been operating as a visual artist, which has led her to rethink the space of the concert stage as installations and performances, combining music with contemporary dance, fashion and visual art.

Most of us art lovers here in Merida are really looking forward to enjoy an installation or performance by Tomoko, the sooner the better.

If you want to know more about Tomoko Mukaiyama go to:

www.tomoko.nl

Interview by Alejandro Azcárate for TYT