

1. You conducted a master course for SIO last year. What did you feel about the course?

My visit to SIO last year began with a solo master class in the afternoon. Initially I was struck by the beautiful salon-style setting, which reminded me of the famous European music studios of the 19th century. It was informal and friendly in the sense that it was in a home, yet formal and respectful in that students listened very attentively and had clearly worked on their craft very seriously. The international background of the students gave the studio a wonderfully diverse character. When I travel for performances and master classes, I notice distinct differences in playing style from one country to the next. At SIO these styles and approaches are blended, with students from all parts of the globe sharing their backgrounds in a way that will greatly enrich the intellectual, musical, and social life of each student. In this environment students are also able to form lifelong friendships across several continents. The level of devotion and serious study evident in this master class was quite impressive, with numerous excellent and musically compelling performances presented. It is a tribute to Kuni's great skills as a musician and pedagogue that he has been able to build such a thriving studio and attract such a great following from students of such diverse backgrounds.

In the evening I had the opportunity to work with the SIO as a group and to experience the enthusiasm generated by ensemble playing. The group was very cohesive and played with a great sense of humor (which I feel is one of the most important and most difficult aspects of music making). It was wonderful to work through the great literature with them and share my ideas, reflecting on the endless possibilities the music offers for various interpretations. Even the earthquake occurring during the session didn't diminish the enthusiasm!

On a personal level, it was absolutely delightful for my wife (Mariko Jasmin Arakawa) and me to meet Kuni and his wonderful parents. They were such warm, welcoming hosts, and we're looking forward to seeing them again in June! We were also able to spend time with several students and their families, walking through beautiful Shakujii Koen, as well meeting SIO musicians and

members of the community who work tirelessly to keep this excellent program running.

2. What are the features of the 5-string viola? Why did you make it?

As a student I played both violin and viola, and was already intrigued by the possibility of combining these two instruments. I was also very interested in the possibility of designing a viola that was as comfortable to play as a violin.

Historically there have been many attempts to add a fifth string to the viola, most notably by J.S. Bach, Niccolò Paganini, and by Hermann Ritter (original Principal Violist of the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra). These attempts were limited by the technology available in previous eras. I felt that, given the technological advances of our age, particularly in the manufacture of strings and bridges that could withstand the added pressure and tension, it should now be possible to build a truly playable 5-string viola with a rich, even sound and ergonomic shape. (Five-string electric violas had already become fairly common, as these are far easier to manufacture than acoustic five-string instruments.) I decided that the best person to design my 5-string acoustic viola would be the renowned experimental luthier David Rivinus. His asymmetric designs and willingness to rethink every aspect of viola building made it possible to produce an instrument that compromises neither the quality of sound nor facility of playing. It took several years of work, but finally in 2001 I had my ideal viola. Normally violists are faced with a dilemma: a small instrument is easy to handle but has a small sound, while a large instrument with a big sound is difficult to play. The viola David Rivinus designed for me solves that problem through its asymmetric shape. It's 50 cm diagonally, resulting in a very big sound. However, from the player's neck to the left hand, the distance is comparable to that of a small viola. Additionally, the upper right bout is only as big as it would be on a violin, making it easy to shift into high positions. With the fifth string added, this gives the instrument a range that is a full octave greater than that of a traditional viola. The instrument looks quite unusual of course, and some audience members have asked me if it melted in the sun. But the sound and playability are ideal for me.

3. You are going to perform a concerto that you wrote with SIO. Could you tell us about the piece?

The concerto has four movements that are strongly influenced by jazz and fiddle styles.

The first movement, Possum Trot, is named after a trail in the countryside in Illinois. “Possum” is a colloquial term for the opossum, a rodent that looks like a very large rat with a pouch like that of a kangaroo. Opossums are generally shy, slow animals, but they run very quickly when startled, which is reflected in the music in my concerto.

The second movement, “Triathlon”, consists of a theme and three “athletic” variations. In the second variation I quote one of my favorite pieces, Richard Strauss’ “Till Eulenspiegel”.

The third movement is entitled “Hoedown”, which is a traditional harvest festival with fiddling and dancing.

The final movement, “Walpurgisnacht”, is based on a German legend about the annual gathering of witches. The musicians will make every effort to end the concerto with horrible noises reminiscent of witches cackling and casting awful spells.

4. Please tell us of the initial enthusiasm of playing the concerto with SIO!

During last year’s SIO session I was thrilled when we played an excerpt of my concerto several times, each time more energetically than the last! And I was even more thrilled when we agreed to perform the entire concerto in June of 2016. I feel that this diverse group of musicians from all over the world, under Kuni’s wonderful guidance, will be the ideal ensemble for the Asian premiere of my concerto!