

# Jazzed

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## Hironomi

Composing  
With Colors

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HIROMI



Composing with Colors

By Bryan Reesman

Jazz pianist and composer Hiromi Uehara is a whirlwind of musical energy. Her diverse recorded repertoire over the last 16 years verifies that claim. While she has released a fair number of solo albums, she also revels in collaborating with equally talented peers who allow her to widen her horizons. She already shares a Grammy Award for performing with The Stanley Clarke Band on their 2010 self-titled album, which won Best Contemporary Jazz Album at the Grammy Awards in 2011.

I first saw Hiromi live at the Montreal Jazz Festival in 2017 where she played a concert with harp player Edmar Castaneda, which was recorded for a subsequent live CD titled, appropriately enough, *Live In Montreal*. They had shared the same stage the previous year but for their own sets. "It was my first time seeing him live," she recalls. "I was just fascinated by how he plays and the way he uses his instrument. It was really magical."

Both musicians embrace many musical genres and like to test unorthodox ideas. For example, *The Guardian* in the U.K. noted how Castaneda begins one of the *Montreal* tunes sounding like a ragtime guitarist and ends sounding like a kora player. The live album spans different moods and styles and includes a special

cover of a tune the pianist had been dying to do: the "Cantina Theme" from *Star Wars*. And the duo performed it their own special style which went beyond the original melody.

Her collaboration with Castaneda is typical of how Hiromi interprets jazz, in which she implements different approaches that range from the melodic to the textural. On her new solo piano album *Spectrum*, one track finds her interpreting Gershwin in her own inimitable way while another has a boogie feel to it. Going back in her catalog yields the same kind of results, with "Kung Fu World Champion," from her sophomore album *Brain*, serving up a dissonant, funky vibe. By contrast, on the *Sonicbloom Live* track "Note From The Past," she is plucking the strings inside the piano with her players matching that approach. That tune offers more of a rhythmic thrust.

Such eclecticism started with her original childhood teacher, Noriko Hikida, who in their home country of Japan instructed the young Hiromi in an unusual manner. She taught her to think in terms of colors, not traditional musical terms.

"I think she was trying to find the way to teach little kids," recalls Hiromi. "When teachers use musical-specific terms, sometimes it's hard for kids to understand what these words mean. For example,

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there are all kinds of dynamic symbols on the score – forte, piano, mezzoforte, and crescendo – and there are also musical terms like *expressivo* and *marcato*. It's hard to understand sometimes, and what she did was colored all these score papers with colored pencils – the forte symbol with red, pianissimo with blue – so that I could visually see what these sections should sound like. This section should sound more fiery, more powerful, strong. That section should sound more romantic, melancholic, soft." She felt that it was easier for 6 year-olds to envision these colors and play rather than interpreting unfamiliar terminology.

Hiromi studied under Hikida between the ages of 6 and 18. Hikida was a big fan of jazz, particularly Errol Garner and Oscar Peterson, and she introduced her young student to their music early on.

"I was 8 when I first heard Errol Garner's *Concert By The Sea* and Oscar Peterson's *We Get Requests*, and I was just fascinated by how happy they sounded," says Hiromi. "I couldn't stop dancing to the music. Then she explained that they play what they feel at the moment. That's improvisation. [I said] 'Wow, that's so cool. So they don't read music?' 'No, they don't. They just play over the chords.' That was a little too complicated to explain to me because I was 8. I started listening to all this music and just tried to imitate them, copy what they did."

The musical prodigy began composing music at the age of 6 years old. When asked whether she has revisited anything that she wrote as a child, she notes that one works with the inspiration around them. "The inspiration you have at age 6 or 7 is very childish," she laughs. "I wrote this song when I was 7 [called] 'Why Can't Chickens Fly?' Chickens try to fly and they fail, and they just keep trying and fail. I guess finally, in a dreamy world, they could fly." While she says that early tune did have a certain jazz feel to it, she offers that it falls in the domain of the "children's playbook."

Hikida always told the precocious Hiromi that she sounded different when she was on stage, that she sounded better when she performed than in the practice room. She told the young pianist that that was a really rare quality, and that she should really pursue a musical career.

"She always pushed me in that direc-

tion," recalls Hiromi. "I always loved performing, even in a little school concert just playing one song. It was fascinating to share this music journey with all of these audiences. They were just parents of the kids who were studying in the same class, but still for me it was always an audience. That made me really want to become a professional pianist and pursue this career." She is happiest on stage.

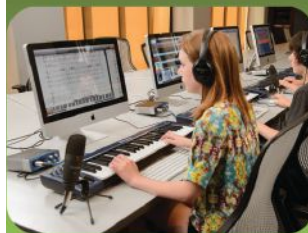
At 14, Hiromi played with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. When she was 17, Chick Corea saw her perform in Tokyo and asked to join him onstage at his performance at the Tokyo Jazz Festival the following night. Eleven years later they recorded the *Duet* live CD at the Blue Note Jazz Club in Tokyo. Things had come full circle.

When she was 18, Hiromi attended the Yamaha School of Music in Japan to further focus on composing. She played in clubs around Tokyo, and one of the bosses of a jingle company happened to be at one of her shows. He found out that she played and composed, so he met her and asked if she would like to write some jingles.

"I was always interested in scoring for visuals," says Hiromi. "I love film music, and writing jingles is like [creating] short film music. So I said, 'I would love to if I can have the opportunity.' That's how he introduced me to the jingle writing world. I remember that one of the Nissan commercials that I did starred Mr. Bean, Rowan Atkinson, and he was going around this [traffic] circle in England in his car, and I had to write songs to it. It was so much fun."

The pianist says that her jingle writing experience actually boosted her interest in writing for other instruments. Up until then, she was mostly writing for piano. "To write for jingles, I had to write for other instruments," notes Hiromi. "Sometimes with string quartets, sometimes for horns, sometimes for vocals. I started to have interest in studying the other instruments, so it was the time for me to go to Berklee [to do so]."

Hiromi's prodigious talents were quickly noticed at Berklee, where she enrolled at age 20 in 1999. She says a lot of her opportunities came about naturally. She



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## spotlight

studied under veteran bassist/arranger Richard Evans, whom she recalls was professor of arranging. She took his class for writing for strings. The pianist was majoring in jazz composition and also contemporary writing and production, but not in performance.

"He didn't know me as a pianist," reveals Hiromi. "He only knew me as an arranger and a composer. He liked one of the midterm projects that I did, and he said, 'For the final project, if you write your own composition, you should try to arrange it. Bring one of your own compositions during office hours.'"

She then recorded an original tune and played it to her professor. Upon hearing it, the first thing Evans inquired about was who played the piano. The track was "The Tom and Jerry Show," which wound up being re-recorded for her debut album *Another Mind* in 2003, the year she graduated from Berklee. After Hiromi disclosed that she was the one playing, Evans became excited and said he had to have a friend listen to the track.

"His friend happened to be Ahmad Jamal," she says. "So all these things just happened really naturally, and I didn't even have time to be shocked or surprised. Ahmad contacted me after listening to 'The Tom and Jerry Show,' and then he introduced me to the record company." That label, Telarc, has released all of her albums.

Throughout her recording career, Hiromi has worked with an impressive variety of different musicians. She gravitates towards people that push themselves on their instruments, which in turn launches her out of her comfort zone. She admits that she does not like to take the easy way out.

When one listens to "Kaleidoscope," the opening track of her new solo album, the power behind her technique is clear, with her hands working fluidly and independent of each other. She is playing rapidly staccato on one hand, while the other is playing a very fast, flowing melody line. She is very much in control. One imagines she practices quite often.

"Playing piano is my vocation," she observes. "I don't really count how many hours I play. I always wonder why people even compliment me when I play for many, many hours on the piano. If you play video games for many hours, no-



“I always wonder why people even compliment me when I play for many, many hours on the piano. If you play video games for many hours, nobody compliments you, right?”



body compliments you, right? Same thing for me. I love playing the piano. Of course, there are certain hours that I do play scales up and down, but even so, I just love this instrument. It has so much to explore, and the more I play the more fun it gets. That's what I always tell little kids when they come to my concerts, and their parents ask me, 'What's the key to playing better and practicing more?' I always tell them, the more you play the more fun it gets."

Although it seems like Hiromi would make a great instructor, she does not conduct master classes or give private lessons. She does not have a lot of free time to be able to do that.

"I can give simple advice," she offers. "But to really teach is very different from just being able to play. The teaching needs professional skill, in my opinion. For example, my first piano teacher couldn't really play the piano much, but she was a professional teacher. [With] people who can play the instrument, it doesn't mean that they are good teachers. Good teachers don't have to be good players. I think the teaching needs really specific professional skill to do, to really find out what each kid really needs. I [would] not consider myself a good teacher. I can't be responsible for that. I can give advice here and there. It comes with great responsibility to teach someone, and you have to be skillful."

Mixing up classic jazz with a lot of modern influences, Hiromi creates a personal style that seems to be more likely to be embraced by a younger fan base, especially as she has gotten up on stage with as many as three keyboards along with her piano. But she says she has felt a connection her diverse audiences. "I'm sure for some people it might be not their cup of tea, but music is like cuisine," she says. "Some people like this restaurant or the other restaurant. Someday you want to something greasy or something lighter. I think wanting to eat food is very similar to wanting to listen to music."

She attracts a multi-generational crowd to her shows. "I think there are a lot of young artists that attract a younger audience," says Hiromi. "When I see my own audience, it's really mixed from young to the old. Then there are teenagers. At one concert in Europe, I



saw a 7 year-old kid who definitely looked like he's studying piano. Next to him there was a lady who was wearing a really nice dress with a pearl necklace. And then next to her there was a guy who was in an Iron Maiden t-shirt. That's how my audiences are, and it's amazing to see all these different characters that come to my show. I really appreciate that."

*Spectrum* is Hiromi's second solo piano album, and the main concept is colors. "I tried to write every day, like keeping a journal," explains Hiromi of her creative process. "There are so many songs that I wrote under the concept of colors. I went through all of the score book that I'd been writing and I picked all these songs, the ideas and the motifs that I'd been writing under the theme of colors, and assembled them."

Her goal is to record one solo piano album every decade. The first one, *Place To Be*, was released 10 years ago when Hiromi was about to turn 30 and she wanted to capture the "sound of her twenties." Thus, her latest effort is meant to capture the sound of her thirties, to reflect upon the experiences she has gone through over the last decade and how they filtered into the music that she has produced.

In comparing her thirties to her twenties, Hiromi muses that she now has more colors to her playing. "I was very happy about it," she says. "When I play softer, I can feel more sensitivity to it. I can play a different kind of softness compared to 10 years ago, and I feel a little closer to my instrument."

With age and experience comes a revised outlook on past work that one has previously composed and released. Hiromi does find herself revisiting and reinterpreting some past work in a concert setting. She can play a trio song in a solo setting, or perhaps perform it with a different trio.

"Also, your age and who you're playing with can really make the song look different," she remarks. "Every time I enjoy it because when I play [it] in a different time period, the song actually teaches me a different perspective, a different angle that I didn't know before. That's really interesting."

It is noteworthy to mention that between 2011 and 2016, Hiromi recorded four studio albums and a live album with The Trio Project consisting of her, bassist

Anthony Jackson, and drummer Simon Phillips. They produced a wide range of styles through their efforts. Phillips is known for straddling the rock and jazz worlds and has toured with and recorded with the likes of The Who, Toto, Jeff Beck, Mike Oldfield and Judas Priest.

"He's an amazing drummer," concurs Hiromi. "He has so many drums in his kit that he really uses every drum. I could see that he really needs all these drums." Phillips plays tom toms called Octobans. He has eight of them, but Hiromi says he only takes four on tour.

"I even wrote a song using the Octobans," she says. "I wrote the motif using those tom toms to start with that. Those were very magical years working with Anthony Jackson and Simon Phillips."

Hiromi views every new collaboration as a possibility to learn. "I love pushing people's limits," she says, "and the people who I choose to play with love pushing me to go beyond limits so that we can see the landscape that we have never seen before together. So it's always been really challenging."

The pianist adds that any time she plays with amazing musicians like Stanley Clarke, Chick Corea, or Michel Camilo, the experience "really teaches me so much," she remarks. "Every minute of playing with them is like a learning experience to me. I

just really want to learn. That's how I feel when I play with these people. I'm trying not to miss every learning opportunity. I think it's important that you are always hungry to learn. Listening is the best learning source for me. I love listening to music and just try to learn something from it."

As far as imparting valuable advice accrued over years of playing, Hiromi offers, "The more you play, you can technically play more things in more ways. But you also can have more colors in your palette. When I was 6, if the teacher told me you have to play blue, then I probably knew one way to play blue. Now I can play deep blue, light blue. I know so many different ways to play blue as well as other colors. It doesn't only come with techniques and the piano; it also comes with the experience of life and so many different things. If you are sincere with your instrument, I think you can make that happen."

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