

*Thursday, March 5, 2020, 8 p.m.*

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COMPOSER PORTRAITS

# Dai Fujikura

# About the Program

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*This season Miller Theatre celebrates the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Composer Portraits.*

*Writer Lara Pellegrinelli has been commissioned to create a snapshot of each composer in words through an exploration of their experiences of community, viewed through the prism of new music.*

“I thought it sounded like melting chocolates,” the composer Dai Fujikura says during an animated phone conversation from his home in South East London. “Or melting cheese. There’s something quite universal about an image like that, which is also very sensual. And I don’t even like chocolate all that much.”

Fujikura has been describing an effect in his ensemble work *secret forest* (2008), the closing piece on tonight’s program. Through experiments with the physicality of bowing, Fujikura created against-the-grain patterns for the strings separately from the pitch sonorities that they play—and which systematically wind down, like a cassette in a player whose battery is dying. This phase transition, from solid to warm and viscous, opens a work in which a grove of sounds is explored from many angles: the string section occupies the stage, while its wind and brass counterparts tender throughout the audience. The bassoon, a solitary passer-by, meets with a sudden downpour brought on by *pizzicato tremolo* (percussively plucked, “trembling” strings) and a bevy of rainsticks.

*secret forest* is less programmatic in orientation than kinesthetic: an

abstraction of what can be sensed by the body. As a composer, Fujikura typically develops works through his experiences of synesthesia, defined loosely as a “coming together of the senses” (from the Greek *syn*: “together” and *aisthesis*: “sensation”), in which two or more of the body’s senses are automatically linked. Perhaps the best known musical synesthete is the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915), whose *clavier à lumières* projected colored lights during his symphonic poem “Prometheus: Poem of Fire.” Although some experts have raised doubts about Scriabin’s associations because of his particular visual vocabulary, numerous other figures—including Rimsky-Korsakov, Liszt, Duke Ellington, and Pharrell—have all detailed experiences of synesthesia, which is likely to be much more common than previously thought.

“Often my associations are tactile,” says Fujikura. “The touch of fingertips is extremely important; my orchestrations are very much based on that. A harmony can be like putting your cheek on a cold concrete surface in hot summer. As I compose, I might think, *If you eat this sound, what would happen in your mouth?*”

*Maybe it's crispy on the outside and there's something warm on the inside. Does something ooze out of it?* The music of some composers leaves me with a very bad aftertaste, and therefore I cannot like it. Or it might smell bad.”

In fact, Fujikura once effectively ended a panel discussion in which he was participating by disclosing that to him, the music of Brahms smelled like a second-hand bookshop. The audience roared with laughter. “I’m not saying I don’t like this kind of bookshop,” he asserts now, with what might be a hint of irreverence in his voice. “I do. It has books that are brown at the edges. You know, it’s a little damp, a little moldy.”

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Sensory exploration is a connective thread in Fujikura’s compositional process, providing him with an intuitive framework that grounds his musical language. What he develops from that foundation feels actively inquisitive in nature, with Fujikura maintaining his sense of wonder—and a sense of humor—into his third decade as an artist. His innate curiosity has been rewarded with numerous honors and accolades: in 2017, he received the Silver Lion Award from the Venice Biennale for innovation in music, the same year he was named the Artistic

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Director of the Tokyo Metropolitan Theater’s Born Creative Festival.

A hunger for tactile discovery may be what drives Fujikura to keep composing for individual instruments, uncovering their untapped potential systematically even while he is at work developing larger projects like *A Dream of Armageddon* (2018-19), his third opera, which awaits its premiere at the New National Tokyo Theater in November. Fujikura has written solos and concertos for contrabass flute, bassoon, recorder, guitar, trombone, bass clarinet, shakuhachi, double bass, and tuba—an unusual

array. His *Flute Concerto* won the 2019 Ivors Composer Award for chamber music, and his *Shamisen Concerto* has received nine performances since its premiere last summer at Lincoln Center’s Mostly Mozart Festival. He is currently composing a viola concerto for Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti as part of her 20/19 Project.

Rebekah Heller, bassoonist and co-artistic director of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), credits Fujikura with “rethinking instruments from the inside out.” The ensemble has been working with him since 2003, when he was one of the first winners of their Young Composers Call for Scores. His contributions became part of the ground

from which that dynamic musicians' collective was launched, helping to transform a bunch of recent conservatory graduates into the commissioners and collaborators who reshaped the entire new music scene.

Dan Lippel, ICE's guitarist, says that Fujikura has "an almost scientific way of approaching how different types of musical gestures lie on an instrument, whether they're based on effects or extended techniques. He is able to build whole sonic phenomena out of those textures." Fujikura's label Minabel is an imprint of and distributed by Lippel's New Focus Recordings.

Fujikura's explorations often map onto natural phenomena, evident from the works on tonight's program, including *secret forest*. *Minina* (2013), one in a series of pieces dedicated to his now eight-year-old daughter, uses a quintet to explore the arrival of a newborn baby, as well as her mysterious, fleeting expressions. *silence seeking solace*, written in collaboration with poet Harry Ross, Fujikura's librettist for *A Dream of Armageddon*, abstracts vocal utterances—whispers, percussive consonants, and elongated vowels—into a language for the singer's accompanying strings. *Gliding Wings*, featuring a pair of clarinets with ensemble, evokes the fluidity of collective bird flight, with the players sonically tethered to each other in a single but elastic body.

The earliest work on the program, *abandoned time* (2003), is perhaps less probative, but for good reason. It

captures the memory of a teenaged boy's aspiration to play the electric guitar (and impress girls)—more precisely, the kind of electric guitar heard in bands like Van Halen, Iron Maiden, or Fujikura's then-favorite, Guns & Roses. "The *Use Your Illusion* albums were really big when I was a teenager," he confirms. "I even had a T-shirt."

Lippel, who will perform that composition tonight, sees it as a milestone in the 40-year history of the electric guitar's integration into new music. "With *abandoned time*, there's an impressive synthesis between a guitar part from a rock vernacular point of view, and the ensemble's musical language, which comes from a modernist, Boulez-ian aesthetic perspective," he says. "There's also a Carlos Santana moment at the end, where I get to play these wailing bends."

As a relative newcomer to contemporary music, the electric guitar does not warrant Fujikura's reinvention. Instead, he plays with *abandoned time's* overall sound design, closely miking all of the individual acoustic instruments. Through his use of amplification, Fujikura blends the ensemble's tonal palette with the electric guitar's, which becomes distorted in a sound world rendered hyperreal.

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Though Fujikura pursued his formal training in the United Kingdom, he was born in Japan and began his music education as a child in Osaka. He learned

Bach, Beethoven, and the other heroes of the classical canon at the direction of a strict piano teacher. Chastised when he altered bits of the repertoire he deemed boring, Fujikura discovered that he could side-step such criticism by playing his own music. (Apparently, he disliked Kabalevsky so much that he referred him as “Baka-levsky”; *baka* is the Japanese word for idiot.) Although Fujikura’s mother still insisted on his disciplined practice of the masters, she also encouraged her son’s newfound interest by reading him a set of composer biographies for children. “I realized, *They’re all German-speaking*,” Fujikura remembers. “I thought, *If I go to Germany, I will be a composer.*”

His parents reasoned that it would be more practical for him to learn English first and, at 15, sent him to be a music scholar at Dover College in Kent, which he describes as a “*Harry Potter*-style boarding school.” Although he would later audition for universities in Germany, he found himself more at home stylistically at Trinity College of Music, where he studied with Daryl Runswick for his bachelor’s degree, then at the Royal College of Music with Edwin Roxburgh for his master’s, and finally at King’s College, London with George Benjamin (to whom his clarinet duo *Twin Tweets*, the precursor for *Gliding Wings*, was dedicated) for his Ph.D.

In his early teens, Fujikura had been enamored with the music of David Sylvian, leader of the New Wave band Japan, and electronic pioneer Ryuichi Sakamoto; eventually he would collaborate with both of them. He also loved the immersive world of film scoring, especially the soundtracks for horror films like *Alien 3* and *Interview with a Vampire* by Elliot Goldenthal. But his engagement with the music of György Ligeti (1923-2006), Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996), and Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) while he was at Trinity ultimately determined his course. In his second year there, Fujikura became the youngest-ever winner of the Serocki International

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—Dai Fujikura

Composers’ Competition (1998). As a foreigner who could not work legally, he depended on such winnings simply to pay his rent in the years to come.

In 2003, he was named a finalist for the Lucerne Festival Academy’s composition project, earning the commission that produced *Stream State* and a workshop of the piece with Boulez, arguably the single-most important figure in contemporary music during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Boulez went on to conduct its world premiere, and continued to support Fujikura’s work, with subsequent commissions for his own Ensemble Intercontemporain and 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. One imagines the

elder statesman's influence on Fujikura through his pristine voicings and spatial orientation, to which Fujikura applied a childlike sense of play. Boulez urged him "to always be curious."

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Asked about the role that community plays in his work, Fujikura does not reflexively turn the conversation towards the composers or performers with whom he has longstanding relationships, though they clearly have his affection.

He began his life in one place, one far removed from the wellspring of classical music; he now lives happily in another. He thinks of his profession globally, with his work taking him most frequently to continental Europe, Japan, and the United States. Although some of Fujikura's pieces are related to Japanese subjects or written for native instruments, he resists simplistic notions of identity; he only began to learn about traditional Japanese music when he attended the summer program at the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt (IMD) in Germany during his twenties.

Where you are from, he suggests, is not something to be proud of. It's purely accidental. "My childhood dream was to be a composer, not a Japanese composer" he says. "I want to make sure my music has no country."

Fujikura's transcendence of national borders is mirrored in his home life. His wife, Milena Mihaylova, an artist, is Bulgarian; their daughter, Mina, born in

the United Kingdom, could theoretically hold three passports until she reaches adulthood. (The family took a vacation this year with a small windfall resulting from the news of Brexit and a subsequent drop in the exchange rate, while he was waiting for commission funds from overseas. "I have to thank them for delaying my payments," he kids.)

He works from their apartment every day, an activity he likens to breathing. "By the time I realize it, I'm already doing it," he says. He Skypes frequently with musicians, sending them screen shots of scores in process and listening in on rehearsals. He goes out little, he says, meeting people only when he picks up his daughter from school most days.

"The music I want to make is like the world I want to live in: a utopian world," he says. "I don't want to see immigration officers in my utopia. It's not that I want to feel like a god and recreate the whole world. It's more like what happens when you move into a new apartment and make it look nice, so you can invite someone you like over for coffee. *secret forest* is like that. For the duration of the piece, for that 17 minutes, the birds sing the way I like my birds to sing. And I can be in a forest where my nose isn't stuffed up with allergies. It's just my little place."

*Notes from the composer*

***Minina*** (2013)

*Minina* is a chamber work based on materials from the symphony concertante

*Mina*, the first piece I composed after the birth of my first child. I started a month after she (“Mina”) was born. When I completed the piece, she was a five-month-old baby!

I was truly inspired by attending the childbirth (not that I did anything there), especially by the sight of a newborn baby. I was amazed how one’s life on earth starts so suddenly. This piece begins as if it starts in the middle; five musicians play together at first, as if they are one instrument, acting like a baby new to life. The music shifts from one mood to another rapidly, just as if you were looking at the baby’s face, which displays four expressions in one second.

In *Minina*, there is a section where the bass flute solo is accompanied by prepared dulcimer and bells and so on; I imagined it as a dreaming section. It is strange looking at a one-month-old baby: you can clearly tell she is dreaming, but about what, I wonder. She has only been here for a month; what can she see, to make her smile or cry, so vivid is her dream. I found this experience both mysterious and peaceful, looking over the crib in which she is sleeping.

*Mina* was composed with large sections at its beginning and in the middle featuring just the quintet of soloists, as well as its cadenza, on which I drew for *Minina*. Both pieces were written for five musicians from ICE—a chamber ensemble with whom I have a long-standing relationship and with whom I can work most intimately. Despite the

fact we have a vast ocean between us (I live in London, ICE is in New York), we communicated via Skype and email, recording samples on phones and computers and sending them back and forth; I felt as if they were in my room in London while I composed. I think that this is the best composer-player relationship you can ask for!

So obviously this piece was written during a very special time of my life.

### ***silence seeking solace*** (2013)

This is one of the many works on which I have collaborated with poet Harry Ross. As is usual for us, we created the music and text almost simultaneously, so that the sound of the English language matches the sound of the music and the use of voice exactly. For instance, the passages of whispers and non-vibrato are reflected by the strings’ harmonics or phrasing, and the words set to this bear the sound world in mind. In certain places I limited the number of consonants that Harry could use. In others I asked him for words to create more percussive sounds that would relate to the ensemble texture and would be a little like “white noise” when sung quickly.

The grist for the work comes from the sculptures *Frau im Fels* (Woman in the Rock) and *Sphaera* by the contemporary German artist Stephan Balkenhol (b. 1957). Harry Ross visited Salzburg to see these sculptures before we started to write. I am not sure these two sculptures are connected, but we imagined them to

be. *silence seeking solace* is written from the point of view of the woman in the rock, who oversees the rather ordinary looking everyman standing atop the golden sphere in the middle of the city.

Harry writes, “I visited Salzburg last year overland from Güllük in Turkey, traveling 2600km via a large collection of different modes of transport. I felt that the subject matter merited this modern-day pilgrimage. When I arrived in Salzburg, I attempted to find both sculptures with no map and asked everyone I met their opinions of these art works. Their answers were unanimously complimentary—it was wonderful to experience such wholehearted engagement and response to a public art commission—and it was great to be so welcomed by so many people. When I finally arrived at Kapitelplatz, I sat opposite Sphaera. Something about the work made me feel very humbled. I basked in the sun and reflected on the many people I had met on my journey, and the enthusiasm of the people of Salzburg for the art works in their city. I hope that our work pays suitable homage to Mr. Balkenhol’s wonderful pieces, the people who commissioned them, and the people who live with them.”

### ***Gliding Wings*** (2019)

I had written a clarinet duo *Twin Tweets* (2019) for my teacher George Benjamin’s 60th anniversary, and I had asked ICE’s Joshua Rubin if he’d be interested in taking a look at the score, since the

ensemble has two clarinetists. We know each other well, and, when he didn’t write back right away, I thought maybe something was wrong. But then he told me he had a better idea. What if I could expand it to something bigger: a piece for two clarinets and ensemble? Ten years ago, members of ICE told me about Miller Theatre’s *Composer Portraits* series, and it’s amazing that I’m now having this portrait concert, and that I have this commission.

I immediately thought that a clarinet duo could be something like two birds gliding in the sky. I don’t particularly have much interest in bird song, but I am always interested in the movements of birds.

How freely they fly together with other birds, gracefully moving together but not completely so, as if completing each other’s movements.

Flying together, but not fighting to be leader. (Unlike humans, birds, insects, and fish are clever: they don’t fight for leadership, especially when they are swarming.)

Freely flying, but then always moving around each other. Free, but with an overall shape.

This led to the clarinets moving in a similar direction for the most part, sometimes like they are flying very far above the ground and coming down towards us, closer to the earth.

Never stopping, flying very fast, and yet very calmly.

I thought the clarinet would be the best instrument to do this, as it



has a vast range, and each register has very different sounds. In the same way that birds fly, the clarinets cross pitch registers, from very high to low, moving around, flying around the middle register, sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always complementing each other.

If we were like birds, free and completing one other, the world would be a more peaceful place.

Materials from *Twin Tweets* have become part of *Gliding Wings*, but I have also written a great deal of new material, extending the original duo to make a completely new work in the end. The ensemble expands the clarinets' material at the start of the piece, beginning to grow as if it has a mind of its own. What it creates influences the clarinets, with each feeding the other musical ideas so that the materials between the duo and the group are gradually shared.

I always find it so much more challenging to re-compose a work from existing materials. (I guess I'm a composer, and it's more natural for me to make music from scratch.) This was a very fulfilling challenge for me.

***abandoned time*** (2004; rev. 2006)

This piece was written back in 2004. I think this was my first-ever commission from Japan, which is the country of my birth. I remember that they asked me if I could include a guitar, and I decided that what I actually wanted to write for was distorted electric rock guitar. I was thinking about my high school life just

after I moved from Japan to the UK, living in a dormitory where every single boy aspired to play the guitar. I remember hearing the same pop music phrases played badly over and over again from the neighboring rooms.

When composing *abandoned time*, I wanted to use the classic techniques of rock guitar music—finger tapping, palm mutes, bending the note upwards by pushing the string upwards—all those things which you can hear and watch on a rock music video; it is very different from the pianissimo way of using electric guitar that I sometimes see in contemporary music. Vibraphone and piano materials are an extension of the harmonics played on electric guitar, and some stretched harmony played by the ensemble is an extension of the “wah-wah” effect of a distortion pedal on an electric guitar.

I am writing this program note in 2012, looking back at what was in my mind when I wrote the work in 2004, looking even further back at my high school experience in 1993. It all feels very nostalgic in a distorted way, as if I'm looking through a prism.

***secret forest*** (2008)

Just before I composed this work, I had written a short viola piece called *flux*. In it, I focused on the “bowing” of the instrument and the player's right arm because I had used a lot of “plucking” string techniques (like *pizzicati* and also playing with a guitar plectrum) in the past. I began with composing the rhythm of

the bowing, and then wrote notes (using another way to organize pitches) with no relationship to the bowing. This solo viola piece had quite a cool and unnatural sound. Then I imagined what would happen if a whole string section were to play like this (unnatural bowing). So I began composing *secret forest*. The bowing rhythm of the string section is almost always in unison.

I have an image that there are ropes between the tip of the conductor's fingers and the bows of the string players. Furthermore, I imagine marionettes: players resembling puppets.

Another thing I try to express is the process of changing texture: how melodic material changes to energetic *marcato* and vice versa. This idea originated from the experience of working in the electronics studio, spending many hours listening to and shaping the tiny sound I just created. I think it is interesting when the conductor increases and decreases the tempo dramatically (one beat of the conductor equals one bow stroke), and I put this idea into the work to show change.

In addition to the "marionettes," there are woodwinds and brass in the auditorium, and their role is completely different from the musicians (strings) on stage. In my previous spatial works, I have tried to produce an effect of feeling

as if instruments located separately in a hall were playing together on the stage by using monitors. In this piece, I have an image of strings that reach from the top of the conductor's finger and baton to woodwinds and brass beyond the audience. In my mind, these woodwinds and brass are the "forest," and the bassoon located in the middle of them is a "person" who walks into the forest.

When I go to a forest, my nose is blocked and gets itchy because of an allergy. Birds sing (if you can call that singing!) annoyingly and insects make terrible noise. These insects' sounds may be thought to be beautiful in Japanese culture, but I want to say, "Could you make a little more beautiful sound? Maybe vary it a little?" Therefore, I'd rather see the beautiful pictures of nature in *National Geographic*. This "secret forest" is an imaginary forest where birds and insects make only my favorite sounds, and my nose gets never blocked. I feel really comfortable there. I have composed this piece in my house, a tiny, noisy London flat that is the exact opposite of the "secret forest."

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