The art of reinvention

Composer Dai Fujikura and librettist Harry Ross on The Great Wave

An opera about Katsushika Hokusai was never in the plans for Dai Fujikura and Harry Ross. But the pair, who met at a music college composition seminar, had previously collaborated on wide-ranging projects; when this idea arrived almost by chance, it felt like a perfect fit.

Dai grew up in Japan and moved to the UK as a teenager, first living in Dover before making London his home. He says he 'knew nothing' of Japanese art growing up. 'I knew the name Hokusai,' he says, 'and I knew *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* because it was an iPhone emoji.' But when a friend gave him, his wife, and his daughter preview tickets to the British Museum's 2017 Hokusai exhibition, the artist's output blew Dai away. 'I was astonished to see the volumes of his works – mangas, prints, paintings, everything. It all had the wow factor.' In the gift shop, he picked up *Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave*, edited by Timothy Clark, then-Curator of Japanese collections at the British Museum. One day, Dai's wife suggested he write an opera about Hokusai's life, and Dai immediately called Harry to see if the idea would work.

In 2017, Dai and Harry were about to write *A Dream of Armageddon*, Dai's third opera and his first with a libretto by Harry (Harry had previously translated the libretto for Dai's *Solaris* in 2015). 'Making an opera is like making a film,' Harry explains. 'You have to pitch it and find a house and production team. All this time you're starving in a garret like in *La bohème*, so as soon as one is in the bag you have to look ahead to the next one.' The duo keeps a slate of potential projects in mind, but *The Great Wave* captured their imaginations with its potential for 'live lyric theatre'.

Their research into Hokusai unveiled an indefatigable creator whose life ran counter to common stereotypes of a troubled, barely solvent genius. His works number over 30,000, and he planned to live to 110 (he died at 88, 90 by traditional Japanese reckoning). 'He was super popular but constantly wanted to be better,' Dai says, seeing no hint of the 'self-destructive' or 'depressive' artist of popular imagination.

'He never gave up,' Harry says. 'He was always trying to do new things. Hokusai defies the notion and example of the Romantic artist. He's an artisan, just trying to do the best he can for his own sense of spiritual beauty. Something grabbed us about that. He led an extraordinary life.'

Unknowns peppered the facts and fictions uncovered in their research. The most contemporary biography, written by Iijima Kyoshin about 50 years after Hokusai's death, is markedly embellished. But Dai and Harry found the emotional anchor in his unique relationship with his daughter Ōi, who moved back in with Hokusai when she divorced her husband for his inferior artistry. 'That was very unusual in Japan at the time,' Harry says. 'She was in her 40s, and she carried on running the studio with her father.' While Ōi is an accomplished artist in her own right, very little is known about her ('she just disappeared after Hokusai's death,' notes Harry), but this father-daughter, artist-to-artist relationship forms the backbone of *The Great Wave*.

'The most interesting thing about two humans who are both artists and related is how they grow old together and support each other,' notes Harry. 'There's also what an artist does day-to-day. I'm an artist. Dai is an artist. Dai's daughter is still at school but a very talented painter. My eldest child studied fine art at DJCAD in Dundee. My youngest is a filmmaker and rock musician. Why do we do these things? The question is quite poignant, especially in today's rather cynical and polarised world. We all have family. How we interact with children and our parents is something we all experience. This whole endeavour has been a family enterprise; my middle daughter who studies Geoscience at Glasgow even helped by finding articles that described scientifically what kind of wave is depicted.'

Another historical personage who finds his way onstage is Dr Philipp Franz von Siebold, a German merchant masquerading as Dutch since the Dutch were the only foreigners then allowed into Japan. He not only supplied Hokusai with the Prussian Blue pigment that gave *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* its iconic hue but took several works back to the Netherlands. Hokusai's influence on the international art world is hard to overstate, and the global forces making his art possible provides more fascinating context.

The pair formed a compelling narrative by fleshing out facts with well-researched and historically plausible fictions, tied together with music-driven storytelling whose alchemy will differ with each live performance. 'We are not here to make a documentary,' says Dai. 'We want fantasy in an opera – they're singing – but if the audience thinks something is made up, it probably isn't.' Some of the story's richest and strangest details come straight from Hokusai's letters.

Dai and Harry enjoy an open back-and-forth throughout each collaboration. 'We don't work where the librettist writes the libretto and then the composer locks themselves in a little hut by the lake to write,' Dai says. Their process is capped off by a sing-through of the work where they figure out phrasing and timing issues practically.


Harry Ross making his own woodcut print at Tokyo's Adachi Foundation.

Harry sees *The Great Wave* as a light piece for dark times. 'It is about what it means to be an artist, to work with artists, to create things that are beautiful, and to always want to improve,' he says. Of course, Hokusai's times were also marked by repression and uncertainty. 'We subtly, sometimes humorously, allude to the historic context of early 19th-century Japan,' he says. 'It was almost completely closed off and an autocratic regime. If you did something wrong, you could be killed.'

Hokusai's chameleonic – and sometimes counterintuitive – reinventions captivate the pair. Part of this was (depending on how you count) well over 25 name changes expressed through more than 75 different signatures. Despite Hokusai essentially starting fresh with each rebrand, this was usual practice in Edo-era Japan, as artists found employment creating bespoke works for wealthy patrons while making prints cheaply and efficiently for a growing middle class.

'A copy of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* would have cost as much as a bowl of soba noodles. Out of that you'd have to pay your workshop', Harry notes. The lack of copyright at the time also spurred innovation. When Hokusai was struck by lightning – twice – he changed his moniker to The Man Who Was Struck By Lightning – 'like Mr Invincible,' Harry says. 'Hokusai was brilliant at PR. He sold a load of paintings on the back of it.'

The prints of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* are a mere 25x37cm, between A3 and A4 in size. When researching in Japan, Harry was hosted by Tokyo's Adachi Foundation for the preservation of woodcut printing. He made his own prints using similar methods and materials as Hokusai did. He also toured to many of Hokusai's famous vantage points in search of Mount Fuji. 'I learnt that printmaking is a technically complex process. It requires a lot of investment and six or seven people on hand to carve the cherrywood blocks,' he says. 'And each print only sells for a fiver. While you would be producing around 8000 copies, a rudimentary grasp of arithmetic and back of an envelope workforce projection indicates how slim the margins were. And after a few years, this one's boring, and your customers want another.' Hokusai's eye for commercial art and its market feels very modern.

Hokusai's business acumen had another angle; his grandson accrued huge gambling debts, which Hokusai and Ōi had to pay. Dai explains that gambling at the time likely involved 'dodgy' gangsters to whom you did not want to owe money. 'There's no time for a "Romantic" walk in the park,' he says. 'Hokusai needed to print, and as far as we know Ōi was a great producer and businessperson who ran the brand. It's a beautiful relationship,' he says, noting that he doesn't know which role is 'larger' in the opera. 'They are dual leads.'

Another facet of Hokusai's life was when a wealthy patron in Obuse asked to be Hokusai's student and allowed Hokusai to create works without fear of state censorship (a constant theme in artistic history, Dai notes). Hokusai took seven days to walk to Obuse in his 70s; when Dai went, he took the bullet train. 'Hokusai could make whatever he wanted there,' Dai says, 'and he did. He was very generous and would just draw things for kids if they asked for a rabbit or a dog.' It is possible that, deep in storage, Obuse's old houses still hold undiscovered Hokusai sketches. This friendship enabled Hokusai to make expansive paintings – not commercial prints – and this final chapter also closes the opera. 'The paintings with the tiger and the dragon are particularly beautiful,' Dai says. 'He was always drawing dragons into the sky, or as he would say, heaven – he was a religious man too.'


Dai Fujikura and his daughter at the British Museum in 2017.

Dai sees Hokusai's artistic and personal conviction as inextricably tied to his plan for longevity. 'If you keep making art and trying to improve, you can learn for a long time,' he says. 'He was an artist every single day and a businessman with commercial concerns, and he wrote an extremely funny and arrogant letter to a publisher who offered to lend him money, claiming it wasn't enough. Those events are in the opera.'

Dai's output spans a wide variety of orchestral forms, with extensive concerto experience developing an instinct for spotlighting soloists. *The Great Wave* is written for nine named characters, a large chorus, and an 'uplifting' and 'bright' sound world. 'We love using the chorus to maximum function,' Dai says. 'They are constantly active as villagers, students, and workers.' Dai describes the orchestra as *Don Giovanni*-sized, 'very classical' and his priority is that the singers are happy and comfortable. 'I really want to protect them,' he says. The reason he and Harry sing through the opera is to make sure there are no awkward parts that would worry singers when bringing characters to life. Dai also aims to immerse the audience in the world with little preamble. 'That doesn't mean the opera starts loud,' he says, 'but you're immediately in the action and ready to absorb everything.' These ideas of transportation and transformation are important to the opera's sections that explore heightened reality in Hokusai's dreams.

One thing audiences might not have heard on the operatic stage before is the shakuhachi flute, which Harry feels is integral to the opera's sound world. While the bamboo flute is ubiquitously Japanese, Dai has been to shakuhachi festivals in Prague and London, where players from all backgrounds impressed him with their historical and musical knowledge.

Dai and Harry sent Timothy Clark the first draft of their synopsis to have the opinion of 'a proper historian,' in Harry's words. 'He was so generous,' Harry says. 'He pointed out things that would have been implausible, while revealing things we wouldn't have known. Most importantly, he understood how we were embellishing facts in a way that stayed true to Hokusai's world. We're writing a theatre work that's imaginary but based on reality, and it was good that he felt it captured the spirit of the time.'

Dai is continually fascinated by the Hokusai behind the print. 'Hokusai had this driving force to go forward,' he says. 'He was very good at marketing. He had to sell. Then he changed his name, so nobody knew him, and quickly became famous again. What do you do with a person with that kind of talent? It would be so nice to meet him. He sounds like a witty person.'

'Hopefully,' Harry says, 'you meet him at the opera.'