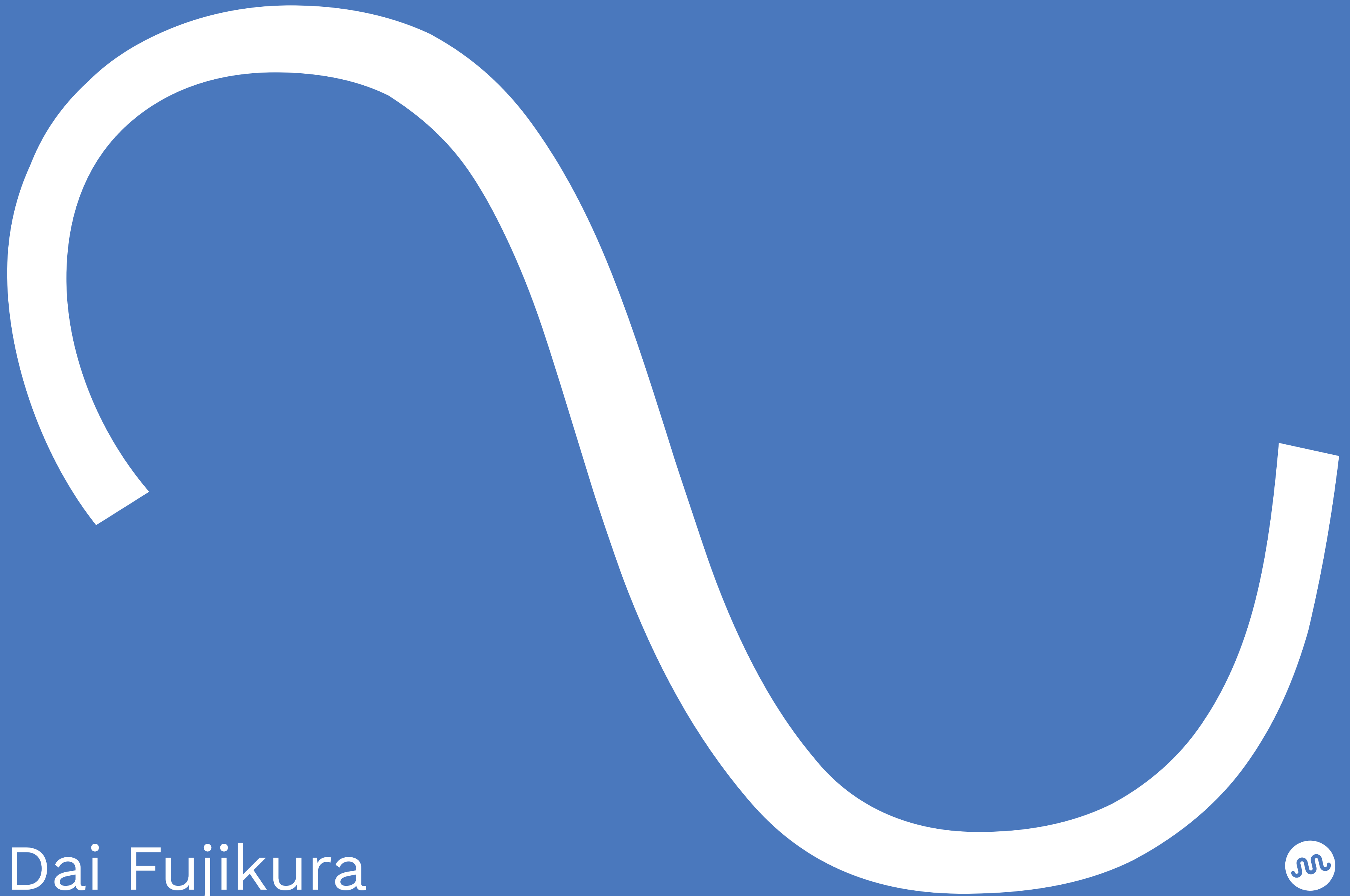


AQUARIUS



Dai Fujikura



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1. Aquarius
Quartet Amabile
2. Ai (合い) (live recording)
Yuki Deai, sho
3. Dash
Andrea Biagini, alto flute; Luigi Sini, guitar
4. Floating Fireflies
Stef Van Vynckt, harp
5. Ryu
LEO, koto

Aquarius

6. SAKANA
Heather Roche, bass clarinet
7. Ele
Isaac Shieh, natural horn
8. Cutting sky
LEO, koto; Hidejiro Honjoh, shamisen
9. Infinite String (live recording)
Ensemble Nomad; Norio Sato, conductor
10. Moon (live recording)
Akiko Kubota, biwa; Tatsuya Wada, viola da gamba (Ensemble Muromachi)

1.

Aquarius

I always thought of a group of string instruments as more than just a collection of soloists. When they play together, the sound becomes a completely different living organism, like another instrument.

The sound of a group of strings—including the string quartet—has an elasticity. In my opinion it is the only combination that continually allows you to form one shape into another, in a sort of shape-shifting sort of way.

And it is not only the shape. While listening to such sounds, I start to imagine what it is like to touch, squeeze, or eat the sound. Is it hard on the outside but soft on the inside, or the other way around? How does it taste?

I wanted to construct a piece which freely changes form without any gaps or having a discernible feeling of sections. Before you realise it, the string quartet is making a sound quite different to what it was playing a moment ago.

Since I imagined a sort of floating, liquid form, I thought Aquarius was the perfect title. Coincidentally I found out as I completed the piece, that we were just about to enter (or had just entered) the 2000-year long Age of Aquarius.

I had no previous idea about—nor am I particularly interested in—the astrological ages, but with the timing of it all, I couldn't help but name the piece Aquarius.

The world premiere of Aquarius was in Hakuju Hall.

2.

Ai (合い)

“Ai” was commissioned by the sho player Yuki Deai.

Although I've written for sho and electronics before, this is my first work for solo sho.

Naturally, the sound of sho is always beautiful no matter what I compose. This presented an unexpected challenge: how can I write music that is my own and beautiful to me?

The piece was finally completed while working with Yuki on video conference for a long time and many times—sometimes composing on the spot in front of Yuki on video conference and asking him to try out on the spot. In the end, this process allowed me to find what was beautiful through interaction, finding the beautiful in curiosity and discovery.

3.

Dash

For me, the feeling of this piece is water floating in the air like a stream while turning around and drawing a circle in various shapes. It feels like a small planet orbiting around the melody.

Dash was originally written for Saxophone and Harp. By request from the musicians on this recording, I worked closely with them to make an alto flute and guitar version. Now I don't know which version is supposed to be the “authentic” version, and the latter version sounds like Dash meant to be played on alto flute and guitar.

4.

Floating Fireflies

The harp has always been a mysterious instrument for me. I knew the function of the instrument, but I always knew there must be more than how the instrument works.

When I received a passionate email from the harpist Stef Van Vynckt asking me to write a new harp piece, I was delighted. Another harpist, Mai Fukui, was happy to co-commission the work with Stef; I felt that at last the long awaited time had come for me to research the instrument.

It turned out to be more research into harpists—the musicians who decided to dedicate their lives to the instrument—rather than research into the harp itself. Why did they choose this instrument?

Why do they become so obsessed with it? What is so great about it?

I was composing this work during the pandemic, so I could spend a long time with them remotely, trying out many different things. It was more as if I was trying to get into the harpists' minds—their moods, their approaches, their relationship to this unique instrument.

After all these experiences with the two harpists, the music material I came up with was something that appeared to float, hovering without a particular direction. Or maybe there IS an overall direction. Perhaps it is something between the two states.

5.

Ryu for koto

Even though I was born in Japan and lived there until I was 15 years old, I grew up completely unaware of Japanese musical instruments. So, when LEO approached me about writing a new work for him, I decided I needed to study the instrument, koto, from scratch.

When I compose, I always think about how to create a new sound, but before writing for a Japanese instrument, how can this traditional Japanese instrument shine as an instrument?

I have written several works using koto, but this is my first solo work for koto. I wanted to figure out how not to spoil the beauty of koto sound. So this time, I had a long chat with LEO. I would write a little score and send it to him, and he would take a selfie video and send it back to me.

More than half of those sketches I wrote didn't sound great; hence I threw them away. However, gradually I started to find fragments from the sketches I sent to him in the videos of him playing.

In going back and forth many times a day, there were moments such as, "This is it! What do you think of it LEO?" "Wow, It sounds so beautiful!" Those moments of encouragement led me to carry on composing this work.

Ryu has many traditional koto playing techniques, but not in the traditional style. It also has a very experimental section. Hence, I think this piece has both totally not traditional and also traditional koto sounds. I consulted with LEO about all the physical virtuosity and the new and unusual combinations of the traditional playing technique in a very fast tempo to see the most effective way to perform it.

Our solution has a groove, yet there's a part that feels like it's floating. In these feelings of physicality and rhythmic groove that open up space for a beautiful floating feeling, I found my own practice with this beautiful instrument. This space between resonates with what traditionally koto playing is all about.

6.

SAKANA

This work was originally written for Tenor Saxophone, then later I worked on the clarinet version. I always imagined that bass clarinet would be very effective, with those multiphonics, which I worked with Heather Roche, but that was a long time ago. We both—at least I had—completely forgotten about the bass clarinet version of SAKANA. Then when the pandemic hit, we were all locked down in London. Even though Heather and I were living in the same city nearby, we could not meet, but we started messaging each other. It was perfect timing to resurrect the bass clarinet version of SAKANA. During the lockdown in 2020, Heather was locked in the house with bass clarinet, therefore she could record at her home, then I could work on the edit and mix at my home—not so far from her house. After some discussion, we completed this recording.

The title SAKANA comes from the word "fish" in Japanese. In this piece, I imagined light reflecting off of their bodies as they move around in water—sometimes smoothly and sometimes with rapid movement. I wanted this piece to be one large phrase, which is made out of multiphonics and notes, including quartertones, which are broken down from multiphonics. Some of the fast rhythmic passages become tremolo, in other words these rhythmic passages are rhythmized tremolo, and will transform smoothly into the multiphonics with the phrases as a part of a big line. SAKANA has a peculiar feeling, the tempo is fast, though I regard it as slow music. There is a lot of action if you are standing near to this piece, however, if you are "looking" from afar, it is a slow moving fish....

7.

Ele

This was the first piece I composed for a period instrument, natural horn. As usual, I spent many hours with the musician who commissioned this piece, Isaac Shieh. Natural horn, as the name suggests, is dependent on the natural series of pitches that occur when depending solely on perfect ratios; therefore it was very much me battling with the harmonic series chart which also is derived from perfect ratios. We would meet on video conference and try to work through the details but I was feeling stuck.

Halfway through, after many notes and fragments were thrown away by me, I stopped resisting this tuning system

and took a different approach: I wrote many phrases as a sketch and asked Isaac to play those without correcting the pitches (for any natural horn player, the musician must correct the pitches with their lips, even playing the baroque music). Then I cut out all the phrases I didn't like and assembled them all based on the recordings of my sketches played by Isaac.

So the score looks like a microtonal modern music score, though as Isaac commented, "it is the most natural piece to play"—as the performer does not have to correct the pitches at all. The piece is naturally microtonal.

8.

Cutting sky

Cutting Sky is the third movement of the "Okeanos" cycle (although each movement can be played independently). The cycle is written for a combination of Japanese traditional instruments and western instruments. Cutting sky features koto and a viola which is played only with plectrum to match the plucked sound of the koto. This work is in a way written for an imaginary instrument—the "super-koto", as the plectrum viola acts as a sort of extension of the koto. As the rest of the four movements of the okeanos cycle have a fluid structure and feel to them, I wanted this movement to have a tautness and precision, as if cutting the air with the sharpest of swords!

About the koto and shamisen version on this album:

At the time Cutting Sky was written,

fifteen years ago, I didn't know the shamisen instrument. But in Spring 2020, I started learning the shamisen myself. It was a joy to practice this instrument and learn its unique sound.

Looking back now, I realise that in 2006, fifteen years ago, I was writing shamisen music on the viola without knowing it! As proof, this viola part was played with a guitar pick.

The shamisen plectrum is much larger than a guitar pick, and this work can be played with a shamisen with almost no rewriting of notes. In fact, it is way more natural to play on shamisen, when viola with a guitar pick—you cannot say it is a traditional viola playing!

In this way, a new version of the koto and shamisen was created. No—this may be the original version, just I didn't know at the time.

Infinite String is about the very beginning of life. After fertilisation, cells multiply, and rapidly replicate their DNA. I used the timbre of tutti strings as if they were a growing zygote, rapidly changing in shape whilst creating more packets of the same information. The result is that a body of sound grows out of these small packets of musical information.

I have composed quite a few compositions which are inspired by the early stages of life—often from listening to what my wife shared with me about the sensations she felt while she was pregnant—3 months; (my butterflies); 6 months (Rare Gravity); birth (Mina); 2 days old (Three Miniatures); 4 months old (Poyopoyo) and so on.

Although I knew the sound of the viola da gamba, when I wrote Moon, it was my first baroque instrument to write for, so I wrote it with close collaboration with the player. I was surprised how smooth it was for me, as if I was a Viola da Gamba player in my previous life.

However, Moon's Biwa part was unexpectedly difficult. Akiko Kubota, a biwa player, said that she knew that I was learning to play the shamisen now since the pandemic in 2020. Therefore "the biwa is easy to understand for you".

It was totally untrue.

I had a hard time understanding the mysterious mechanism of Biwa's left hand and finding out how to use open strings in music and how Biwa sounds

most effectively in my music. I wrote some music for Biwa, then threw away, tried again and then threw away... More materials were thrown away than the material which remained in the score.

However, this process of letting go of many things—the things I thought would be difficult but were surprisingly smooth, the things that seemed easy but were difficult, the assumptions and determination—letting all go, I found the voice of Moon.

When I listen to the rehearsal recording, it sounds like these two instruments are one instrument, so that was also the world view of the sound that I aimed for.

Aquarius

LEO appears by the courtesy of
Nippon Columbia Co., Ltd.

Infinite String
演奏: アンサンブル ノマド、
佐藤紀雄 (指揮)
録音: 2021年10月2日 (土)
東京芸術劇場 コンサートホール

Moon
recorded by Tak SAKURAI (Pau Ltd.)

Infinite String
recorded by Koichi Ishimaru

Aquarius + Cutting sky
recorded by Nagie

Floating Fireflies
recorded by Emmanuel Sproelants

Ai
recorded by Takumi Nishikawa

Aquarius
commissioned by Quartet Amabile

Ai
commissioned by Yuki Deai

Dash
commissioned by Naomi Shirai

Floating Fireflies
co-commissioned by Stef Van Vynckt
and Mai Fukui

Ryu
commissioned by NIPPON COLUMBIA
CO., LTD dedicated to LEO KONNO

Sakana
co-commissioned by Tokyo Opera City
Cultural Foundation, and Nonaka Boeki
Co., Ltd.

Ele
commissioned by Isaac Shieh

Cutting Sky
commissioned by OKEANOS

Infinite String
commissioned by the New York
Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, Music
Director. Co-commissioned by NHK
Symphony Orchestra and Ensemble
Resonanz

Moon
commissioned by Ensemble
Muromachi

Credits

Infinite String

1st Violin
Wakako Hanada
Shizuka Kawaguchi
Wakako Yokoyama
Yoshu Kamei
Shungo Mise
Ryoko Harada

2nd Violin
Mariko Aikawa
Maiko Matsuoka
Kei Sakoda
Saki Sirokoji
Mari Minoda
Miho Komatsu

Viola
Fumiko Kai
Saori Oka
Yoshiko Hannya
Aya Saito

Cello
Takui Matsumoto
Yui Hosoi
Aki Kitajima

Double bass
Yoji Sato

All tracks composed, edited,
mixed and mastered by Dai Fujikura

Directed by Motoichi Sugita (SMJI)

Artwork & design by Mihail Mihaylov

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