

NOTES ON FUKUSHIMA & THE FUKUSHIMA YOUTH SINFONIETTA

By Panos Karan

Pianist Panos Karan is the founder of Keys of Change, a British non-profit that has been supporting the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta since it was established in 2011. He has traveled and performed in Fukushima many times since the natural disasters of March 11, 2011 devastated much of northeastern Japan.

About Fukushima

Fukushima is a prefecture of Japan about 200 miles northeast of Tokyo. The area along the coast was affected heavily by the earthquakes and tsunami of March 11, 2011, the largest to strike Japan in recorded history. An even greater disaster befell Fukushima, however, after the explosion of a nuclear reactor in an electrical power plant caused a major radiation leak. An area of 30km radius from the plant was evacuated and an exclusion zone was created, closing this part to the public for three decades into the future. As a result, more than 150,000 people were instantly displaced. People in towns close to the exclusion zone have since been living under the threat of radiation poisoning, with children and young people being the most vulnerable. For example, children at elementary schools are not allowed to play outside during the breaks, for fear of contamination from the air or soil.



Part of a small Shinto shrine, abandoned in the evacuation zone (Photo: Eloise Campbell)

Today, the word Fukushima has a coldness that is hard to explain. People look at you half pitying and half fearful when you say you were there. This is the place where an invisible threat ruined lives in ways that cannot be measured. For example, a town of 70,000, which was spared by the earthquake and the tsunami, is left with barely 10,000 residents. Homes that are still standing, were abandoned in a panic, locked away in an exclusion zone, waiting silently for their residents to return in 30 years, and crumbling with every passing day. Powerful psychological side effects are crushing the identities of the refugees from the exclusion zone. They stumble purposelessly through life, human beings who have been shoved aside, feeling adrift and forgotten. It is hard to move forward in time, when progress is measured in 30-year intervals.

In 2013, I had the chance to visit the exclusion zone near the Fukushima nuclear plants, an area closed to the outside world for the next 30 years. It felt like walking on gravestones. Time had stopped. The town had become a shadow of a memory, as if someone had pressed "pause." Everything was left behind untouched, like the visitors' book in a monastery, with the last entry written on March 11, 2011.



A town in ruins, abandoned in the Fukushima exclusion zone. (Photo by Eloise Campbell)

My previous visits to Fukushima

I have traveled many times to Tohoku. I came for the first time in August 2011, six months after the earthquake, and played impromptu recitals for survivors living in emergency shelters. More trips followed in 2012, with many performances in evacuation shelters, schools, and clusters of temporary housing units, as well as joint concerts and musical collaborations at several high schools. During my last trip in 2012, other European musicians travelled with me to Fukushima (Raul Jimenez and Zach Tarpagos), and we spent about 10 days working with young musicians and rehearsing for a joint performance. Travelling again with Zach Tarpagos the following spring, we visited new schools and performed two concerts in collaboration with students from six different schools. And we continued to visit evacuation shelters and temporary housing communities, performing for thousands of people who had been displaced from their homes and listening to their stories of loss and struggle.



An impromptu piano recital at an evacuation shelter, August 2011. (Photo: Tariq Zaidi)



Flutist Zach Tarpagos in rehearsal with a student from Fukushima, October 2012. (Photo: Panos Karan)

What a banality to say that in Fukushima I found my purpose as a musician! But it is true. It's not about ego or pianistic self-indulgences, loud applause or triumphant ovations in grand concert halls. Let the smile of a single student from Fukushima, living through more than most of us can grasp, teach us why we play music: a smile that is enough to touch one's heart forever and to give meaning that lasts a lifetime.



First encounter with a piano keyboard, in a Fukushima evacuation center, March 2013 (Photo: Eloise Campbell)

Everybody in Fukushima had his or her own unique, powerful, beautiful way of showing gratitude. Yet I felt guilty accepting it, because for me the greatest reward was an audience ready to listen, with souls open to the music. A part of me stayed in Tohoku, still aching with fresh wounds, and selfishly I took a part of Tohoku with me: the dignity, the generosity, the kindness of the people there, sharing their hearts with the world and hoping that the world will not forget them.



Curtain call following a joint concert in Fukushima, October 2012. (Photo: Fumiko Tanaka)

Why is this important?

There is something raw about the universal language of music and all the messages it carries. "We are here. You are not alone. We are together. We want to communicate. We want you to feel better. We want you to know that we care." All this spoken in a few musical phrases, without a translation and without words.

Playing a piano concerto with students from Fukushima was one of the most inspiring moment of my life as a pianist. Rehearsing together for several days, I had the opportunity to talk with them about speaking their emotions through music and the

difference between rehearsing and performing. I saw how hard they were trying, how they were improving, how they were using expression to say what words couldn't.

And then the priceless smiles of a 12-year old students, who feel all this and more, without saying anything. Students that know more about the messages of music than professional musicians. They are brave to play in concert what they have just learned in a rehearsal one hour ago. The advanced teach the beginners and they all come to school early and stay behind late to rehearse, by themselves, without teachers, simply because they want to. They try as hard as they can to speak out their emotions with music, to say what words could never say.



Joint concert in Fukushima City Concert Hall, March 2013. (Photo: Eloise Campbell)