

The Day the Crane Flew

(Originally written in Japanese)

By Machiko Ishihara for *Bits Lounge Magazine* (Toronto, ON)

The silhouette of a single crane moves behind the cattails. Then another flies in the opposite direction. Sensing their presence, 5, 6 cranes gather; spreading their broad, white wings, they start to dance on water. As I take in the scene, the leader makes a signal and 1, 2, 3 cranes – powerful and elegant – take off from the water. A crane in Toronto!? No, it was a moving picture unfolding behind my eyes. But there was a crane... at the concert – *Japan Meets World* – that took place last fall at the Japan Foundation, Toronto.

What was so strange about the concert is that, although I can't remember whether or not I've ever seen a real-life crane at a zoo, I was able to see it clear as day. Violinist/composer Maria Kaneko Millar's composition *Tsuru [The Crane]* is of Canadian birth like she. Playing the violin as she dances, she skillfully maneuvers left and right-hand pizzicato to turn her violin into a koto and create a rare musical work.

The mastery of the performance was exquisite, but why did I see such vivid images? It's like I entered a time machine, revisiting memories from infancy through the advent of adulthood. I guess these things really did happen. Japanese fables and folk tales, elaborately-illustrated sliding doors in shrines, temples and castles, hanging scrolls, Japanese art exhibitions, wedding mementos... the list goes on and on. For dozens of years, these images had unconsciously collected inside of me. They hadn't moved till now, though. Moving pictures, unleashed from my subconscious self, now danced forth in Canada. Had I not accepted my friend's invitation, had I not attended the concert, these images would've continued to sleep quietly within. As if struck by magic, I watched the violinist play, transfixed.

I figured the composer had spent long periods of time in Japan studying traditional Japanese music. Upon asking, however, I found out that [Maria] had only attended Japanese school and visited Japan during summer vacation. Though born in Edmonton, I am sure that from an early age, she was exposed to the essence of Japanese music in her home.

Reservations to attend the concert reached capacity immediately, and according to the presenter, looking out at the audience, one could count with 10 fingers the number of people of Japanese descent. The rest of the seats were filled with people of seemingly Western descent. I wonder what sentiment *Tsuru* evoked within them. Were they boggled by the technique that made the violin – a Western instrument – sound like a koto and shamisen? Did they see a crane? [Maria] created a new form of music with her performance style and unique technique. Beyond that, her youthful energy revealed the Japanese spirit and crane that quietly underlay the hustle of my life stretched between Japan and Canada.

Since graduating from Juilliard, [Maria] has actively performed abroad. Along with her fellow alumni, flutist Shawn Wyckoff (who performed at Carnegie Hall), they co-created *Silver Roots* and made New York City their base of operations. They performed a trio by Toshitsugu Ogihara that, according to Shawn, had never been recorded before. They had to have the score shipped from Japan, rushing to learn the work over a period of 3 days in time for their Toronto debut. The cellist, also from Juilliard, was specially invited for the performance; together, they became a single body of energy. The impact was huge.

I expect great things from [Maria], a musician who unites the spirit of Japan with the world. Until my next encounter, I will have to make do with the Canadian geese.