

Introduction

Time flies, and “Music Paradise,” which started in July 2022, has now been running for two years and is now entering its third year. What this really shows is the depth of Canada. This is not limited to music, but also applies to various fields such as politics, economics, business, science and technology, and the arts. I believe it is full of energy and creativity, idealistic, unconstrained by convention, and capable of producing something innovative.

So, what I would like to introduce to you today is a new ballet called "Kimiko's Pearl." It is a mixture of music, dance, stage design, the present, the past, history, politics, deception, resignation, hope, forgiveness, courage, family and love.



"Kimiko's Pearl" pamphlet

"Bravo Niagara!"

"Kimiko's Pearl" was commissioned and produced by “Bravo Niagara! Festival of the Arts”, a non-profit organization that brings outstanding performing arts to the local community in the Niagara-on-the-Lake region of Ontario.

“Bravo Niagara!” was founded 10 years ago by Toronto-born Japanese-Canadian pianist Christine Mori and her daughter Alexis Spieldenner.



Christine Mori (left) and Alexis Spieldenner : Co-Founders, Bravo Niagara Festival of the Arts, Co-Creators and Producers, Kimiko’s Pearl. Photo by Bo Huang

Christine graduated from the Juilliard School after studying at the Aspen Music Festival and School and the Tanglewood Music Festival. She has worked in the United States for over 30 years as a pianist with the Florida Orchestra, and has performed with a wide range of artists, from Isaac Stern to Bobby McFerrin, earning high praise. After retiring from active duty, Christine returned home to Niagara Region, on the outskirts of Toronto. As she began her second life, she combined her Japanese Canadian identity with her passion as a musician. The time had come to make a lifelong dream come true. Her aim was to bring world-class musicians to the Niagara Region and provide the local community with the finest performances.

Her daughter, Alexis, grew up absorbing a love of music under the tutelage of her pianist mother and graduated with honors from Duke University. She is a recipient of the Lincoln M. Alexander Award,* presented by Ontario's Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, which recognizes young people who have made outstanding contributions

to the promotion of diverse cultures. (Note: Lincoln M. Alexander was Ontario's first black Lieutenant Governor.)

“Bravo Niagara!” combines the mother's artistic sense with the daughter's management skills to land good jobs. Their commitment to being closely involved with the local community is also well-received. Since its launch in 2014, “Bravo Niagara!” has brought in stars of classical music, including James Ehnes (Music Paradise Issue No. 20) and Jan Lisiecki (Music Paradise Issue No. 23), who have both been featured in this column, as well as jazz and pop stars such as the Manhattan Transfer. They are unique opportunities for the local community to experience some of the world's best music without leaving their home. The music and performing arts offered to the local community continues to grow with each passing year.

Japanese Canadian Identity

As “Bravo Niagara!” laid a solid foundation, mother-daughter duo Christine and Alexis began working on a long-held idea - to transform the journey of Japanese Canadians into a piece of performing art.

The history of Japanese Canadians can be summarized as follows: their early immigration, their discriminatory treatment, the stable life they earned through hard work and enduring hardships, the outbreak of the Pacific War and their internment and confiscation of their property as enemy alien immigrants. After the war, they overcame their wartime hardships and established a respected position in Canadian society.

In reality, there are very few works of art that reflect the history of Japanese Canadians in this way. This is similar to the fact that the hardships Japanese Canadians have overcome are not fully recognized in current Canadian society. Christine and Alexis believe in the importance of conveying Japanese Canadian history and pride through art. Indeed, it is the heart of Japanese Canadian identity.

That being said, depicting history through art is easier said than done. So they chose ballet. It is one of the ultimate performing arts created by mankind. The space created by music, dance, and stage art expresses human emotions that go beyond words. It can include everything from

very specific events to emotions such as joy, anger, sadness, and happiness.

However, creating and performing a new ballet requires a script, music, choreography, set design, dancers, musicians, rehearsals, a performance venue, and so on, which is an enormous expense. Modern performing arts are faced with the practical problem of how to secure funding. At one point, even Carnegie Hall was on the verge of bankruptcy and demolition.

However, Christine and Alexis' vision, meticulous strategy and passion paved the way. With funding secured from the National Creation Fund, the idea was finally coming to fruition.

Ballet as a Composite Art ~ Seven Spectra

"Kimiko's Pearl" was only completed when the following seven spectra intersected and merged.

First, the story: this is Christine and Alexis's family journey across four generations. In fact, Toronto-born Alexis is the fourth generation and her middle name is Kimiko. She is the model for "Kimiko." The family story is told from Kimiko's perspective, beginning with her great-grandfather, Shizuo Ayukawa. The core of the piece is a story based on the true story of the Ayukawa family. However, a story alone does not make a ballet. It is essential to have a script that brings out the essence of the story in its full glory through ballet. It was written by Emmy Award winning writer Howard Reich.

Second, there is the music. Kevin Lau, a contemporary Canadian composer, composed a completely new work based on Reich's libretto. There are no lines in ballet. Every emotion and scene have to be portrayed through music. The melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that Lau weave create emotions on stage that can only be expressed through music.

Third, there is the choreography. Yosuke Mino, a member of the world-class Royal Winnipeg Ballet, oversaw the choreography. As the play progresses, the dance expresses the inhumane measures of internment, as well as despair, resignation, hope and love. It brings out the rhythmic movement of well-trained dancers.

Fourth is the stage art. This is a truly diverse and high-quality collection of works, ranging from pop art to works with motifs of the history of Japanese Canadians, and includes the work of great painter Norman Takeuchi, who is also an Order of Canada recipient. The stage is

simple, but accentuated to indicate the time and place.



A painting by Ottawa-based Japanese artist Norman Takeuchi (used as the stage background).
Photo by Embassy of Japan in Canada

Fifth is the performers. The performers include Rachel Mercer, principal cellist of the National Arts Centre Orchestra, who is also a regular in Kevin Lau's works, and Mariko Anraku, Associate Principal Harpist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. The superb performance encapsulates the story and the dance.

Sixth is the dancers. Participants from Winnipeg, Coastal and Boston Ballet companies bring to life a story full of ups and downs through the strength, flexibility and beauty of their well-trained bodies.

And seventh is the sound and lighting. It is the key to transforming the venue where ballet is performed into a time and space that is completely different from that of the audience seats. Kevin Lau's music is carefully designed to surround the audience 360-degrees so that no matter where it is heard from, it matches the progress of the ballet.

These seven spectra overlap to complete the two acts of "Kimiko's Pearl." After careful rehearsals, the time came to test the performance's true worth in front of an audience.

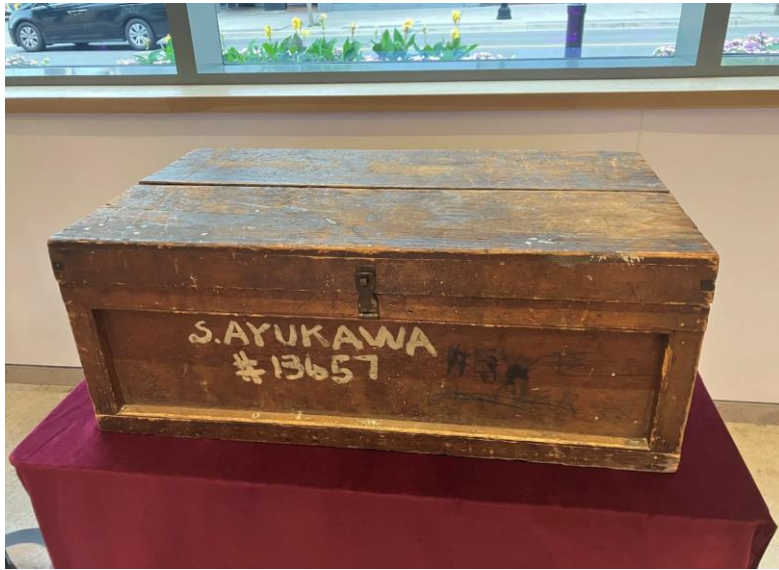
World Premiere ~ St. Catharines, Ontario, June 22-23, 2024

The story of four generations of the Ayukawa family, conceived by Christine and Alexis, was commissioned and produced by "Bravo Niagara!" with support from the National Creation Fund. The world premiere of the new ballet "Kimiko's Pearl" was held on June 22nd of this year at 7pm at the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre, a local theater that boasts outstanding acoustics.



Greetings after the performance. Photo by Embassy of Japan in Canada

Of particular note was the wooden trunk handmade by Alexis' great-grandfather, Shizuo Ayukawa, which was on display in the lobby. This was donated by the Ayukawa family to the "Canadian War Museum" in Ottawa to preserve for future generations the history of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the war. It was specially exhibited for this world premiere. The wooden trunk quietly accused the inhumane treatment of only being allowed to take one bag with them when Japanese Canadians were forcibly displaced. It is also placed on stage as an important item connecting the events and memories of four generations of family members to the next generation. The number "13657" engraved on this wooden trunk quietly denounces the inhumanity of this inhumane measure.



A trunk from the Ayukawa family donated to the War Museum (on display at the venue only on the day of the event). Photo by Embassy of Japan in Canada

The world premiere began with greetings from those involved. On behalf of “Bravo Niagara!”, Alexis spoke about her family's feelings, her feelings as a Japanese Canadian, and her thoughts on the new ballet. I really felt the weight of every word. I also expressed my deep respect for the Japanese Canadians, who are the foundation of today's extremely good Japan-Canada relations, and for the journey they have taken through overcoming hardships. This was followed by a spirited opening act by a Japanese drumming group.

The ballet "Kimiko's Pearl" begins with the scene of the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which marked the beginning of the Pacific War. Although it is the same stage physically, the art, music, dance, and lighting created a completely different time and place. It's transformative: the setting moves from British Columbia to Winnipeg to Toronto. There are scenes where they are condemned as enemy immigrants, and scenes where they courageously confront harsh conditions. The love story of Kimiko's grandparents falling in love is touchingly lovely. In this wordless depiction, you will be overwhelmed by the artistry of the dance.

The wonderful performance, which combined music, dance, and stage art, ended in the blink of an eye. The endless standing ovation was a clear indication of the emotion of the audience.

Beyond

The world premiere of "Kimiko's Pearl" marks the beginning of an ambitious project. On the music front, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra is scheduled to perform "Suite 'Kimiko's Pearl'" in the 2025-26 season. This is a re-arrangement of the piece originally composed as a ballet into an orchestral piece. "Kimiko's Pearl" will begin its journey on a new avenue. Stravinsky's "The Firebird" is also an orchestral piece developed from ballet music. I am convinced that "Suite 'Kimiko's Pearl'" will be Kevin Lau's masterpiece.

I believe that the ballet "Kimiko's Pearl," which depicts the history of Japanese Canadians, should in the future be performed in the capital, Ottawa, the largest city in North America, New York, and even Tokyo. Next year will be the year of the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai. Various cultural exchanges will also be taking place between Japan and Canada. By all means, I hope that "Kimiko's Pearl" will be one of the pillars of those exchanges.



Chatting before the performance. Second from the left is Alexis Spieldenner, third is Christine Mori (from the back), the ambassador, MC Mary Ito (CBC Radio), and Gary Kawaguchi, former president of the JCCC. Photo by Embassy of Japan in Canada