

Years ago - a recognized IBM specialist in Japan, today - conquering not only New York, but also European jazz scenes, having performances on almost all continents and an extensive discography. An excellent composer and jazz pianist, an outstanding music teacher (Steinway Educational Partner) and a sound engineer in his own New York DTC Studio. In a word - Takeshi Asai, in a conversation with "Muzyk" Magazine, just after recording a session for his latest album, this time - recorded in the convention of a jazz piano trio.

Your adventure with music started quite unusually ...?

Yes. I never thought I would be a full-time musician until I became one at the age of 41.

Did you know from the beginning that the piano is THIS instrument, or have you tried with any others?

My first instrument was piano, but when I was 13, I started playing guitar and loved it. I also played flute. But, when I was 16, when I was in a rehearsal studio, I saw a poster of Richard Tee. God told me, piano is your instrument. I took his words and obeyed. Piano became my main instrument on that day.

Although you played the piano from early childhood and you have a solid musical education on your account, and music has always been your passion, you decided to become a professional musician quite late..?

Although I loved music, I have never thought that I was good enough to pursue a music career. As I was a good student academically, it was a natural choice for me to pursue a business career. So, I did. But, America came into play in my life. When I was a college student, I had a chance to take a summer school at Stanford. Then I seriously wanted to make a living in America. That is the first goal, and "how" was only the subtitle. After having worked for IBM in Japan for 6 years, I decided to quit and came to the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, which is where I met a wonderful piano teacher, greatly encouraging jazz faculty. After winning some awards and scholarships, the chance of studying at Berklee became real, so I transferred to Berklee.

Starting all over at the age of 40, you must have encountered a lot of obstacles along the way that you had to overcome. What was the hardest? How did you make it to become such a great an extraordinary musician in such a short time?

Yes, it was hard. But, when I came across this scripture, I made up my mind.

Mathew 6-33: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

So, I named my favorite donut "the kingdom of God and his righteousness." (lol)

When and why did you decide to move from Japan to NY?

I have never thought about coming to NY. My first move to the US was Kyoto to Stanford, the second time was Tokyo to Wisconsin. Then Wisconsin found a way to Boston, Berklee. I stayed in Boston for 8 years, then moved to New York.

What is the career and life of a musician in Japan like? Is it different from the New York

realities?

Basically, the life of a professional musician is similar no matter where you live. But, It's more competitive in NY.

In NY, you are not only an active musician and composer on the jazz scene, but also a teacher at your own school, as a partner of Steinway & Sons?

They say "Keep performing, keep learning, and keep teaching." I found it true and it's so important to me to keep teaching. But, teaching music has never been easy and straightforward to students and parents and even for the teachers. I formed my own studio which became Steinway Education partner, to execute what to me is true in music education. The core of my teaching is sharing my own professional experiences even at the earlier ages. It makes a huge difference. Today, I am proud of my Students. They sound great!!

You also run your own studio where you pursue your next passion?

I didn't become a sound engineer for the sake of becoming a sound engineer. I became a sound engineer as a result of recording and producing my own music. So the motivation is genuine. I am so glad and honored that other musicians now come to my studio to record their music.

There are legends about both the size and the exquisite equipment of your studio. Will you tell us about it?

My studio is not the best equipped studio in NY though, thanks to the modern recording technologies from Neumann, AKG, Presonus, Rode, Ableton, Logic and Apple, I can still record a great sound here. Also, as it's basically a wooden house, I can record such natural sounds. I always think about Rudy Van Gelder's first studio, his parents' living room. Plus, I am a musician who seeks the best sounding music, I have a keen pair of ears for the best sounding sound. I am proud of my Sounds.

Tell us, please, something more about your unique, world-class piano ...

I have a Yamaha C7. I was told my previous owner is the Lincoln Center. My piano dealer tuned it for my demo performance and I loved it at the first play. I thought it's made for me and came to be as a destiny. My piano tuner, the same one for the last 14 years, took care of me with special affection. He told me this is the best Yamaha C7 in Westchester county NY. He, a great jazz pianist and composer in his own rights, used this piano for his trio recording. As you know Yamaha C7 itself is a legendary piano, whose shares the same DNA with the piano that Glen Gould recorded the last albums, which includes Bach Goldberg Variations.

At club concerts, however, you often play the keys. What kind of them do you most like to play?

My acoustic piano is Yamaha C7, my electric piano has always been Yamaha CPs. The current model is CP88. I love it. I also love Italian pianos, namely Fazioli and Nord Stage pianos. But, Yamaha is the home for me.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to interview the musicians with whom you used to play concerts in Pennsylvania. Each of them spoke about you in a very kind way, but also

praised your amazing abilities, technique and flexibility. How would you explain the phenomenon of Takeshi Asai? Where does such versatility and ease of movement in various musical genres and configurations come from?

When I was a young and aspiring pianist, I used to play my stuff, my agenda, my ideas. When I started playing with these PA musicians, who are gentlemen as well as established professionals, I realized one important principle. Listening. Even if you are a musical leader, listen to the fabulous bass line, great sound coming from the G-string, listen to the Charlie Parker phrases coming from Charlie, that's where you start playing. Instead of playing "my stuff" I always try to build my ideas on top of these great playing from these great musicians. Then, I found the band is getting tighter and tighter, the audience is more engaged.

Looking at the list of instruments and programs that you used to record your last year's album (so appreciated by the European press!), "The Electric Project, Vol.2", you can confidently be called a "self-sufficient multi-instrumentalist". Your discography includes albums recorded both solo, as well as in a duet or trio. Which configuration is the most convenient for you?

Funny, I don't know. As Bach and Mozart composed many different types of music, from solo keyboard works to orchestral pieces, I hear many different formats. Still today, I hear a solo piano, at the same time chamber ensemble, electric music. I may continue releasing these different formats.

Your previous album got fantastic reviews in the US and European countries. Reviews were written in Italian, Spanish, Polish... - practically it was the entire Tower of Babel. What do you think is so unique about your music and the language you use in it, that you can charm and seduce half the world?

Thank you! When I was a teen, one of my dream professions was a translator. I guess I wanted to cross the language barriers to communicate with a lot of people around the world. I studied English, some French but found that the most powerful Lingua Franca is music!

Since we are talking about different languages and your fantastic approach to communication - let's talk a while about what you decided to develop in your DTC Music School this year: For several months now, apart from the lessons on site, you also conduct them online, with students in different languages, am I right?

Yes, I am serious about teaching and growing next generations of musicians and good discerning people. A very strong motive for me to teach is, I have a very special method of teaching music. It's based on how I became a professional musician after the late start. It works very well. My students sound great. So, I would love to grow more students so that the world is filled with more music!

Let's talk a little longer about your music: you are currently working on the mix for the latest album, this time recorded in the convention of a piano jazz trio. Who are in your New York trio? How was the session going?

I was such a lucky pianist who had residency in Tribeca to play regularly with great musicians in NYC. I came back to the studio to record a trip album with Brian Woodruff (drums) and Bob Gingery (bass).

Each of your albums, apart from being a collection of beautiful, perfectly played and refined in the production process compositions, is also a story which contains a certain important narrative. What will the album recorded with the New York trio tell about?

I don't usually have a grand album title like May the Peace Prevail the World (lol). (I always go with Vol. x). But I always have a moment for each song, such as "Bacon," because I had bacon for lunch, "Ave Marta" because I had such a wonderful inspiration from Schubert's Ave Maria. It's important for me to live in the moments with music.

What can we expect from the new album? Are there going to be some new compositions of yours?

I composed 10 or more new songs especially for this album. As the chops and ideas of a jazz pianist develop, so the compositions. But, as I always do in most albums of mine, I picked a popular song that everyone knows. It should come out as a surprise.

Tell something about the very process of creating compositions - how do they come into being in your head, what usually inspires you?

That's a bad question (lol). I don't know. It looks like there is no formula or any established process that I can use as a template. All I have is struggle and surprise. Sometimes, a great idea comes down as an instant inspiration, so all I need is writing it down. The main theme of "Le Crepuscule" was born that way. Other songs take a long time to emerge on paper. After so many edits and rewriting, some songs become forgotten, but some survive. Some still make great songs like "653."

In this new album though, a simple song idea has been arranged and rejuvenated by my band members.

So, if there are 10 songs, there are 10 different ways to compose and produce the songs. I wish it was much easier (lol).

Can you tell which of your own albums is your favorite and why?

Hum, that is a hard question. There are many different stories in each album. I hate them all (lol) and I love them all.

In addition to strictly jazz projects, your discography also includes two albums called electronic projects. However, also on them, among the typically electric compositions, we can also find forms of acoustic jazz. How do you manage to reconcile the duality of such an undertaking? - When starting to write a composition for such an album, are you assuming two-track thinking or it just comes itself into your mind?

Great question! To me music is simply one thing. But the faucets are all different. I have been a hardcore acoustic pianist who always care the condition of the piano, tuning, humidity, intonations and voicing of strings. I have used the same piano tuner for the last 14 years, who is also a seasoned gigging jazz pianist.

But, I also hear the beauty in digital synthesis. The funny thing is that I didn't like any analog synthesizer in the 80s, which means I purely love digital. It's strange even to me why I like extremes; old music such as Bach, old instruments like acoustic piano, and state-of-the-art digital

synthesizers.

The time of mixing songs for the newest album is ahead of you. What is the difference between working with your own material and working with other artists' material in the studio?

Good question! As each musician has different musicality, they have different preferences in the sound they want in their albums. For instance, some pianists prefer sharpness in acoustic piano, some prefer warmth. Some bassists want fatness, some prefer clearer definition in the mid to high frequencies.

When I work as an engineer for other musicians, I start with their preferences. But, at the same time, I always have my recommendation. It helps if you find Chef's Suggestion in a restaurant, does It?

Though, there is an issue for a musician/engineer I think. It's very natural to keep seeking the best sounds, which always results in longer studio hours, but there is a line where people don't care. As a musician, I found it at a very early stage, because what matters is music. In most clubs, pianos are not perfect, the sound system is not perfect, but you can still create great music. Beethoven didn't have a 9ft Steinway piano. Rachmaninov didn't have any fancy piano as we have today. So, eventually, producing good music overwrites producing great sounds, in my humble opinion.

Apart from music, you also develop many other passions, and - as the musicians from your trio revealed, DTC studio is connected with kind of a buffet, where you are a fabulous chef?

I always thought and told my students; "before becoming a pianist, you have to be a musician, before becoming a musician, you have to be an artist." If you don't find "beauty," what do you play? I started finding the beauty in photography of great landscape, cooking with beautiful natural ingredients, gardening, the joy of life from planting to harvesting, as well as composing music in many different genres that I find beautiful, Broadway music that I was so much mesmerized when I was a teen, recording engineering to capture the beauty of music. There's a joy of building a studio with my favorite gears. Everything is categorized in one adjective; Beautiful.

You are a jazz pianist, however, you also find your way in classical music very well. Whose albums do you choose most often when you have a moment to listen to music, and whose in turn inspire you the most in creating your own compositions?

I found Glen Gould's recording of Bach Italian Concerto was the most familiar and closer to my own musically. I learned the Italian Concert from his recording and also inspired with Bach Partita Bb in the same album.

On November 2 this year you will come to Poland for the first time to play a concert during Kwizdyskie Zaduszki Jazzowe. What program will you present?

What an honor! Thank you. I only started revisiting all Bach compositions, and started jamming. It is always the last minute for me to complete the program.

So you enter the New Year with a new album, but also with a vision of a long journey to present your approach to Bach on the European jazz scene. What else do you expect this year, what would you wish?

I used to expect a lot for everything I did. But, as I get older, I am switching my approach to nonego-centric ways. These days, I sit at the piano, then listen to what the universe wants me to play. Then, I will play them. That is the same for the concerts and gigs. When I could be a slave to the music, I have the biggest lives as a musician.

Said that though, I always wanted to connect with more people, audience, musicians to collaborate, business people to work with. I have performed a lot in France, but if I could do that in other European countries, that would be a great dream to come true.

On behalf of myself and the readers of the Muzyk magazine, thank you very much for the interview, wishing you all your dreams and goals come true!

Thank you! It is my pleasure and honor to talk with you!