The composer of “Marimba Spiritual,” Minoru Miki (who passed away in December 2011)—referencing that the piece had “been performed more than 10,000 times all over the world, and on numerous CDs”—said that Fumito Nunoya’s recording “is one of the best performances I have heard. I was dazzled.” Miki heard his piece (scored for marimba and three percussionists) on Nunoya’s 2005 debut CD, Red Dragonfly.
This writer has been dazzled by Fumito’s playing numerous times over the past decade. It reveals a rare focus and command. His attention to detail, and the clarity and imagination of his musical ideas, is spellbinding. But what has so many times caught me off guard is the emotional power in Nunoya’s playing: his sincerity and humility—the spiritual element. You know you’re being presented with a gift.

Fumito Nunoya was born in 1979 in Odate, Akita Prefecture in the northwest corner of the main island of Japan. It is a lightly populated area mainly known for growing rice and producing sake (rice wine). Fumito (pronounced “[f]HOO-mee-toe”—with a virtually silent “F”) began to play the piano at age seven, to play percussion in a band at age 13, and to take percussion and marimba lessons at age 17.

He received his bachelor’s degree in music education from Yamagata University (Yamagata, Japan) in 2001. He also studied occasionally with Nanae Mimura, whom he first heard in 1998 and whose playing he immediately loved. On Nanae’s recommendation, he applied to study with me in Boston.

Fumito received his Master of Music degree in marimba from The Boston Conservatory in 2003, and he was the first marimba (or percussion) major in the school’s history accepted to its elite Artist Diploma Program, in which he studied from 2003 to 2006. Working with Fumito for five years was one of the richest experiences in my career. He frequently presented a new, polished piece weekly! The consistent quality of his playing demanded my digging deep to harness the subtlest reactions I felt, and figuring out how to articulate them—which had a major effect on how I teach.

Today, Nunoya lives in Germany and teaches marimba at the Hochshule für Musik Detmold. He was invited to teach as a guest lecturer in the fall of 2009, and was subsequently invited to join the faculty in 2010. He has presented numerous recitals and performed with orchestras in Japan, the U.S., and in Europe. Fumito is an endorser of Korogi instruments, which introduced his signature mallets in May 2009.

Nunoya won first prize at The 3rd Libertango International Music Competition in Italy 2009 and at the Ima Hogg Young Artists Competition in 2005 (which led to his U.S. concerto debut with the Houston Symphony). He also won top prizes at national and international competitions, including the Percussive Arts Society International Marimba Competition in 2003, and the 3rd World Marimba Competition in Stuttgart, Germany in 2002.

I interviewed him recently via email, and did my best to try to discover where the spiritual essence and musicality comes from, hoping it will inspire many other musicians!

NANCY ZELTSMAN: One of the things I have always admired most about you is your ability to get inside musical phrases and really make them “speak” or sing! I know you sometimes create a “story” or narrative for a piece, as a means of connecting different kinds of feelings and attitudes. Can you share some of your methods for developing expression in your music?

FUMITO NUNOYA: Thank you for saying this. I am very happy that you feel my approach to the music is working.

When I get into practicing a piece, or just simply listening to my playing or others, my goal is to sense some kind of feeling, scene, or textures which could relate to our lives from a part of a piece, or sometimes the whole piece. I believe all musicians have this sense, and that is why music becomes very special.

At the beginning, it is like a piece of an emotional puzzle, but the more I get into it, I find a way to connect various ideas—which often becomes a story that could be both non-fiction and fiction. For some pieces, I have to work hard to make sense of it; but for most of the pieces I like to perform, I am able to find a story line with a strong emotional connection through the practice process. This gives me confidence that I “own” the phrasing, dynamics, and am playing from my spirit/soul/heart.

NZ: How would you describe your ideal marimba sound: your “voice” on the marimba?

FN: This may sound a bit corny, but I think when your “voice” through the instrument is coming from your soul or deep inside of your heart, it speaks strongly to people. I would like the voice to be something that will make people feel simply good: warm, refreshed, interested, excited, kind, and loved.

Our lives get complicated and difficult sometimes. Beyond overcoming and accepting those sides of our lives, I believe we are continually capable of new understanding of things or ourselves. For me, that brings strength to try to be a better person, and broaden my heart and love toward everything. These days, I believe this outlook is important to the essence of my instrumental “voice.” So I try to remind myself of these things, and try to love all, including myself.

NZ: What are some ways you learn about new repertoire possibilities?

FN: I listen to other people’s playing from CDs, concerts, radio, and online resource like YouTube. I think I have heard most of the marimba repertoire, so most of the time I am listening to the music written for other instruments to find possible works to adapt to marimba.

These days, I am developing ideas for what kind of marimba repertoire I would like to have, and I am trying to find composers who are creating compositions in a similar direction.
NZ: I have always loved your interpretation of Emmanuel Séjourné’s “Marimba Concerto”—which is very popular right now. What can you tell everyone about it?

FN: First, I tried to appreciate what is in the score: the dynamics, expression marks, tempo, and articulations. The first movement is freer than the second movement; there are many parts with little spaces. I tried to organize the first movement in bigger sections to connect some of those spaces and also to create contrasts in character. In the second movement, I simply try to play very rhythmically—except one part that is like a written improvisation—to make big contrast between movements.

It’s a little embarrassing to reveal the emotional connection I feel with this piece, but I will! The more I play it, the story I imagine is about an 18th- or 19th-century man who lost his loved one. The first movement is about anger and sorrow for the loss; and the second movement is about him fighting in a battle—being melancholy remembering the loss, and moving on.

NZ: Your approach to performing Maki Ishii’s “Hiten-Seido III” is incredibly dramatic. This evokes completely different characters and emotions. Could you describe how you approach this work?

FN: Luckily, the composer wrote a description of this work that gave me a lot of inspiration. His idea was to create a series of compositions based on the Hiten paintings on the frescoes in the caves of China. “Hiten” refers to one or more persons or beings floating in heaven—like angels. There are a lot of ancient pictures and carvings of Hiten. The specific inspiration for “Hiten-Seido III” is a painting from an early period that gave the composer impressions of “primordial, strength, vitality, and radiance.”

My inspiration for playing this piece was strengthened after talking to a friend who knows a lot about Buddhism. She came to a concert where I performed this piece and, afterwards, told me what people in Buddhism believe is Hiten’s task. The Hiten fly between the upper region, heaven, where they live, and the lower region where people live. They are incredibly powerful—and could even destroy things—but use their power to protect Buddha and others.

I developed my own fantasy in which Hiten fly to the lower region to combat evil spirits and save lives. There are some thematic motives which, to me, sound like the clothes worn by the Hiten sometimes being cut, or whirling during the flight.

NZ: Astor Piazzolla’s music is a specialty of yours. In 2009, you were the first marimbist—and the first Japanese person—to win the Libertango International Music Competition in Lanciano, Italy. It’s clear to me what a perfect fit this music is with your spirit. Can you tell us more?

FN: I heard a lot of compositions by Astor Piazzolla from television, radio, CDs, and concerts, and even performed some of them before I deeply got into playing his music. A strong inspiration came to me when I heard his “Tangata” in 2007. This piece deeply touched my heart, and I had to listen to this piece over and over. At that time, I felt lost about what kind of music I would really like to play. But listening to this composition opened my mind—and I wanted to play it. Luckily, I was able to find the written music, and I adapted it for marimba and piano. After that, I dug into more of his compositions and found more pieces I would like to play.

I find that Piazzolla’s compositions often express human feeling in very direct way. I’m able to easily connect with the music and its emotional characters. I believe a lot of musicians and audiences feel the same way. That is why his compositions are very popular and loved! Aki Kuroda is a Japanese pianist who also plays a lot of Astor Piazzolla’s compositions.


NZ: I’d like to find out more about your background. From knowing you over the years, I have the impression that your origins in a small town, Odate, gave you a strong emotional center: an appreciation of beauty in simple things, a deep respect for others, a drive for excellence. What aspects of how you grew up do you feel influenced your values, and perhaps your approach toward music-making?

FN: I’m from a fairly typical Japanese family. My father was a post office worker and my mother is still working for an elec-
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At the point when I met Nanae Mimura, I was very unsure. My first piano teacher, a friend of my mother’s, helped me to recognize my love for music. Even when I hadn’t practiced, she gave me so much inspiration that I felt again that I wanted to keep playing the marimba.

And you! The five years I spent with you while I was a student at The Boston Conservatory meant so much to me to keep going. I can list the reasons but, stated most simply, you allowed me to be “me.” It meant so much to feel this way under the guidance of a world-class marimba teacher and musician.

**NZ:** Thank you; that means a lot to me! You have had the experience of living for quite awhile on three different continents, in three distinctly different cultures. I wonder how you feel about moving frequently between cultures, and how have these places affected you?

**FN:** I feel I have been very lucky to have the chance to live in three countries. It is exciting to be in places I never imagined in my youth. When I was a kid, I always enjoyed exploring new places—finding a new alley or even a shortcut to school. Moving between countries is just a bigger version of exploration.

I could list endlessly all the things I found between different countries and how I feel about them. But the biggest thing I found out being in other countries is actually about my identity and myself. Finding out who I am—even difficult aspects—really helps me to perform.

I have to add that learning new languages is very hard—especially since I was not trained to study hard! Adjusting to new cultures is sometimes difficult, too.

**NZ:** How does teaching marimba—privately, and at Hochshule für Musik—influence your approach to working on your own projects?

**FN:** I decided to accept my current teaching position and come to Germany because I love to work with people at this school. I was also excited by the opportunity to live in a country where a lot of classical music was created.

All the students are unique and, because of that, everyone approaches music differently. That gives me so much inspiration for my playing. Also, as I get into this teaching position more and more, I better understand what things I can do for the students and offer them.

I became the organizer of an event here called “Marimba Days,” which Peter Prommel started a few years before. The marimba festival you manage [Zeltsman Marimba Festival] is an amazing one, where you make all the participants and
faculties feel loved and family-like. I am hoping to make a small
version of it.

NZ: What general advice can you offer, from your experiences in the
past decade, about making professional contacts and creating perform-
ing opportunities? What are some different settings in which you’ve
presented marimba concerts?

FN: For my path, I went to the USA to study the marimba because
I loved the marimba very much and wanted to improve my
playing. After graduation, I performed around New England
quite a bit. I like to play for people who simply enjoy listening
to the music but, of course, I also wanted and had to make a
living, so I tried to find places where I could begin to receive
some fees.

I found many opportunities at local libraries and churches.
Some happened to be wonderful settings with great acoustics!
I also performed at arts centers, school lunchtime concerts and
outreach programs, and at hospitals for patients. Eventually, I
learned there was a network between all libraries in Massachu-
setts through which they spread the word about events they
hosted. I was lucky that news of my concerts spread among the
Massachusetts libraries.

An important thing is: I always found that if I got stuck,
and things weren’t going well, it was because my reason for
playing music was not fundamentally because I love playing.
I know that it is not always easy to keep your love fresh—
though this could be said about pretty much anything! I would
have to say, if you love what you do, then trust it and keep go-
ing. When you love what you do, you have the chance to enjoy
everything about the process.

“Encore Mallets enable me to bring
out the full, deep tones I love most
about the marimba.”
–Nancy Zeltsman

Nancy Zeltsman teaches at The Boston Conservatory and Berklee
College of Music, and is Artistic Director of Zeltsman Marimba
Festival. For more information, visit www.nancyzeltsman.com.

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