

Japanese Art and Popular Songs
with Naoko Watanabe

Sunday, September 28, 2025 – 4:00 p.m. – Barnes Recital Hall

Program Notes

“Song of the Seashore” (ca. 1916) was composed on a poem written by Hayashi Kokei. The song was selected as one of Japan’s 100 Best Songs in 2007. It is a lyrical song that is still widely popular today. Kokei did not specify which seashore he referred to when he set the poem, but it is thought that he was remembering the Tsujido Beach where he spent his childhood. Narita wrote the song to the rhythm of the Viennese waltz, which was popular at that time.

“The Flowers of Wild Orange” (1925) is a poem written by Hakushū Kitahara based on the experiences of the composer of the song, Kōsaku Yamada. It is a children’s song and was later adopted as a song by Japan’s Ministry of Education. The poem was written based on Yamada Kosaku’s experiences of hardship, depicting his thoughts about life symbolized by the flower.

From the Poems of “Matinée Poétique” (1950): Composer Yoshinao Nakada was trained as a pianist but he is better known as a composer of art songs and choral music. *“From the Poems of Matinée Poétique”* is a four-song collection set to surrealist poems by poets who pursued the possibility of poetry with fixed form with rhymes in Japanese. Nakada carefully set each poem to music, and this collection played an important role in the history of music by shedding light on the works of young poets of the time. The poems were written by the following poets:

- I. Island of Fire: Takehiko Fukunaga
- II. Cherry Alley: Shūichi Katō
- III. Tress of Hair: Akiko Harajō
- IV. Maidens in Broad Daylight: Makoto Nakamura

Nakada utilized several Japanese scales especially *miyakobushi*, and whole-tone scale and diatonic scales to portray the symbolic nature of the poems.

“Popular” (2003) was written by composer Stephen Schwartz for the musical *Wicked*. It is sung by the character Glinda and is considered her signature song. While writing the song, Schwartz imagined that the character Glinda was the most popular girl at school. In “Popular,” Glinda attempts to get Elphaba, the future Wicked Witch of the West, to conform to the accepted ideas of beauty and popularity as a means of establishing their newfound friendship. Schwartz described the lyrics as “empty calories” and shallow, with a bubblegum-like sound.

“Do-Re-Mi” (1959) is a famous song from the musical and film *The Sound of Music*, composed by Richard Rodgers with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. In the song, sung by Julie Andrews as Maria, the solfège (Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti) is taught to the Von Trapp children using simple, descriptive phrases. Each syllable of the solfège system appears in the song’s lyrics, sung on the pitch it names. Foreign versions of the song associate each syllable with a meaning in their own language. In most countries, the note B is represented by *si* instead of *ti*.

“Always With Me” (2001) is a song by Youmi Kimura, which was used as the theme song for the film “Spirited Away.” The lyrics were written by Wakako Kaku. It depicts the dilemma between dreams and reality, life and death, and the hope of overcoming sadness. The lyrics express the spirit of exploration, dreams that may be accompanied by sadness, and the promise of encounters, conveying that humans are finite yet possess infinite potential.

Yoko Takahashi’s 11th single, **“Cruel Angel’s Thesis”** (1995) is the opening theme for the anime series “Neon Genesis Evangelion.” The lyrics were written by Nemko Oikawa. As symbolized by the line of the main theme “Young people, become a legend,” the song contains a message encouraging self-growth through overcoming fate and loneliness.

Toyohisa Araki wrote the lyrics of **“Heart of Eyes”** and it was sung by Kyu Sakamoto. “Heart of Eyes” was released as the B-side of a single in 1985. Sakamoto was killed in the Japan Airlines Flight 123 crash on August 12th of the same year, as a result, this song became remembered as Sakamoto's final song. The theme of this song is the bond between romantic partners and family members. It has also been arranged for chorus and became one of the songs included in music textbooks for junior high school.

Naoko Watanabe: Bio

Ms. Naoko Watanabe has been an active performer in the musical theatre industry in Japan for many years. Her major stage credits include The Sound of Music, Roman Holiday, Carmen, My Fair Lady, Mozart!, Miss Saigon, Okuni, COCO, Our House, The Light in the Piazza, and Iliad. She has taught vocal performance at Shobi University in Saitama, Japan. Since 2007, she has been a founding member of the volunteer team “HAPPY SMILE PROJECT,” bringing live performances by professional musicians to communities throughout Japan. In 2013, she formed the music unit “éclatant,” through which she continues to pursue concert and live performance activities. In recent years, she has been singing solo at various Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) events in the greater Charlotte area.

Naoko is joined by Dr. Tomoko Deguchi (professor of music theory at Winthrop University), Ben Phillips (undergraduate music major), Paul Font (undergraduate music major), and Wren Thompson (graduate music major).