

Ayumi Tanaka ***Space “odysea”***

Ayumi Tanaka moved from Japan to Norway ten years ago. From the up-and-coming piano talent, she now has become one of the best. In October 2021, the trio she forms with bassist Christian Meaas Svendsen and drummer Per Oddvar Johansen, released its first ECM album, *Subaqueous Silence*. Earlier in April 2021, *Bayou* published by the trio Thomas Strønen/Marthe Lea/Ayumi Tanaka was another sensation.

If you talk about her with professionals and musicians, they will agree on her undeniable talent to strip the music down to the elementary, her aesthetic use of muteness and mystery. And when you see her on stage, you cannot use other word than “captivating”.

In this original interview for Jazznytt Magazine, she talks about her background in Japan and her musical journey from the love of orchestras to an even more tangible relationship to silence.

Ayumi Tanaka was able to play music practically before she could speak. She started at the age of three. Why so young?

– My parents aren't musicians, but they are music lovers. I grew up listening to music every day from morning to evening. Classical, modern classical composers, and jazz of course, Japanese jazz musicians. I am lucky that I was exposed to a lot of good music as a kid. My parents did put me in Yamaha Music School when I was 3, but not in order to make me a musician or push me in a career, not at all. They needed me to have an activity. My first instrument was not the piano, it was an electronic organ with foot pedals. I chose it because it allowed me to reproduce all the sounds of the orchestras I liked so much – a double bass, strings, a violin, or a flute, I had great fun trying to reproduce all the sounds!

Japanese music education is famously competitive, and Tanaka found herself working towards music competitions, which had an enormous effect of the development of her skill and technique.

– I don't think I was special or more gifted than others at all. I was improving because I was playing all the time. Competition is not forced; it's just seen as a way to progress. I wasn't taking those competitions seriously; I did not even win anything until I was 10. At that time, you had to present a repertoire piece and play and a composition to the jury. I did it until I graduated at the age of 18. It was very intense, yes. But I took most of my inspiration from listening to my peers, the other children, the students around me. They were all working so much! Original music composed by children of my age. It is quite something if you pay attention.

As if playing music was just a way to interact with the people around.

– I was listening all the time to the other children during these years. I had to put myself in their shoes and try to guess. « Are they playing to fill the room with notes or are they addressing their music to specific people? » I think this is how I learned to share the space with other musicians.

The idea of SPACE is a fundamental aspect of music for Tanaka. When we say that she captures attention, we mean that she literally absorbs the energy around her. It is tangible in the music of the bands she takes part in – in “Time Is A Blind Guide”, with Thomas Strønen or with Christian Meaas Svendsen in Nakama Quintet, she is “eating space”. What is the source of this magic?

– I was still playing the electric organ when I finally graduated from secondary school. I was 18, and starting to get tired of playing that instrument. After high school, I stopped playing for a year. But soon I needed money. The first job I found was playing the piano at weddings. It was my part time job during my studies, and it made me feel good, because it was just background music! For once, nobody was paying attention to me! (She laughs) That’s when I fell in love with the sound of the acoustic piano and began thinking about ways to develop my own sound. So I was performing in piano bars. I got to play sometimes nonstop from 9.00 PM to 1.00 A.M. Again, it was just background music, or things that the customers would ask me to play, standards or tunes.

At an age when most young musicians are dreaming of being under the spotlights and gaining recognition, Tanaka flourished and thrived in the shadows. She decided to transform a situation that some would describe as “difficult” into an opportunity to discover new approaches and enrich her creative process.

– After that I focused more on creating a sound space of my own. I remember I used to love immersing myself in sounds coming from different sources as a child. I used to love being surrounded by sounds coming from the sea, the mountain, paying attention to the wind in the trees, the rivers. All these sounds I could reproduce and organize them in layers in my music.

The sound of nature is ever-present in her music. But it is not reproduced, it is rather suggested than imitated. It's stronger this way.

– I wish I could play the sound of nature. Just how beautiful nature is. How every sound is essential in nature. I really think what I do in music is trying to learn from nature.

When I heard her trio playing at Oslo’s Kafé Hærverk in September, I remember looking at my neighbor at the bar because one of the air vents was making some noise just before they started to play. After a few minutes, it was as if the annoying sound had always been a part of the music and had been poetically absorbed in the piano keys.

– Every time I play a concert, I am paying attention to the silence before the music starts and in the music. There is no such thing as silence. It doesn’t exist. The room already possesses its own sound and energy. There will always be some parasite noises, other sources in the sonic environment. It's better to accept it and use it. Actually, I do think the more you practice the better you get in choosing to switch off some surrounding noises or, on the contrary, to include it in your music. I enjoy doing both.

In 2013 she created a trio with Christian Meaas Svendsen (bass) and Per Oddvar Johansen (drums). They released « Memento », a debut album, in 2016 on the record label AMP Music. They toured many countries and explored different cultures with a music which “cultivates the art of feeling rather than thinking” (source: Christian Meaas Svendsen's website).

– We immediately had a strong feeling and understanding that, together, we know how to share the energy. The energy of every note. Even within the silence when there's no note or music being played, there's a specific energy. We don't even have to talk about it or explain it. Every element has its own space and should find it in harmony.

– Christian and Per Oddvar are both interested in Japanese art and culture. One day I came with a piece of music inspired by Gagaku (*Japanese Imperial Court Music*) and we created something together instantly. I never had to explain what I wanted them to play. They knew it already. Sometimes they understand more than I could have expected.

How has the trio evolved over the years?

– In the beginning, it started more like a traditional piano trio. You can hear it on the first album, which I think is more jazz. But this transition between jazz and something which is more «me», perhaps more «Japanese», was not planned. It's something very personal. Living in Norway made me more conscious of my roots and made me want to study and go back to my background. I don't want to generalize, but I think this happens to people when they live far away from where they're from. And it makes me happy. It's a very positive thing. I feel I could never have appreciated the beauty of all these traditions like I do now if I was still living in Japan.

What was it that brought her from Japan to Norway in the first place?

– When I started the piano after stopping the organ, I wanted to improvise with my new instrument and I thought, strangely enough, the first music which would help me learn to improvise was... jazz (laughs!). But it did not happen immediately.

– Japan has a jazz scene but my hometown, Wakayama, was not big enough to get to see jazz gigs. The closest town which had a regular jazz program was Osaka, one hour away from then by train. Unfortunately, the first jazz musicians I met there were crazy about be-bop and hard-bop. I wanted to play with experienced musicians, so the only way was to go to jam sessions, but they said: «You are not playing jazz. You should go home to learn how to play be-bop first. »

She felt estranged.

- I tried hard to learn be-bop. It was sad because I felt there was no other musicians, I could connect to in the jazz scene there. But instead of discouraging me, it made me realize even more how I needed to be honest in my music.

- Later, I visited this friend of mine in Gothenburg, Sweden. It is there that I discovered Norwegian music. I think I started with Jan Garbarek and Bobo Stenson quartet and trio. A revelation: «Wow! This music speaks to me. » They were leaving so much space to each other. It was fantastic. I opened my ears and interest to Scandinavian jazz and then, more generally, European jazz and musicians.

– Discovering Scandinavian musicians made me feel better in general. What a relief! I didn't feel strange anymore. I could be honest and play the music I wanted, the music that, I felt, was me. Oslo is not so far from Gothenburg. I passed the audition for the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. I discovered wonderful musicians and learned so many things from going to concerts all the time.

From then on, history moved fast. Her discovery of the Norwegian scene accelerated Tanaka's

interest in the ECM label. She modestly explains it was a natural encounter, but we also heard that Manfred Eicher was particularly impressed when he heard her play.

This ECM album, the second album by her trio, is called “Subaqueous Silence”. This underwater silence was recorded at Victoria, Oslo Nasjonal Jazzscene, the same venue which captivated her when she moved to Norway, and where she became part of this jazz family. What a perfect allegory to show how important live music is in her creative process.

– The last piece on the album, the title-track « Subaqueous Silence », lasts 9 minutes on the album, but it was originally more than 20 minutes-long. The way we play with space is not quantifiable. I want to compose music which sounds like an improvisation, and I want to improvise music that sound like it has been written. I want these two modes to be equal in my music. That's how I work.

It would be a big mistake though – and a stereotype as well – to think of the music of Tanaka as a musical haiku, because its form and length has no formal limit. There are no constraints in her music.

At the end of our meeting, I read out a quote from the German journalist Ingo J. Biermann. He wrote: « This is one of the most fascinating and freshest piano-trio albums I have heard since I started to write about Nordic music. What a delight! » which underlines she is now considered a Nordic musician. She nods, laughs, and adds:

– Well, he was writing about the music, not me! Of course, I'm happy that my music is considered Nordic. I don't want my music to be tagged this or that. The music carries its own history. I got to meet and play with so many great Nordic musicians, it's a good thing that the music sounds like the scene which inspired it! I am very happy about this, because I feel so lucky to have been accepted in this great community of musicians in Norway. I want my music to be the results of as many mixes as possible; simply because the Norwegian scene is so open.

Anne Yven – Jazznytt October 2021