

## The Fukushima project for child composers: An interview with Dai Fujikura at Muschildren'17:

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### Abstract:

In November 2017, the international conference Musichildren'17, which took place at the Department of Communication and Art of the University of Aveiro (UA), organised by members of the University of Aveiro's branch of the research centre INET-md (Instituto de Etnomusicologia – Centro de Estudos em Música e Dança), welcomed the Japanese composer and educator Dai Fujikura as a keynote speaker.

Dai Fujikura was interviewed by Sara Carvalho and Filipe Lopes in relation to the project with which he is involved in Japan, namely a composition project for children in Fukushima, Japan. The following interview discusses Dai Fujikura's own work as a composer and his experiences with the Fukushima project for child composers.

**Keywords:** Dai Fujikura; composition; experimental music; music education; child composers

### Introduction

In November 2017, the international conference Musichildren'17, which took place at the Department of Communication and Art of the University of Aveiro (UA) and was organised by members of the University of Aveiro's branch of the research centre INET-md (Instituto de Etnomusicologia – Centro de Estudos em Música e Dança), welcomed the Japanese composer and educator Dai Fujikura as a keynote speaker.

Dai Fujikura was born in 1977 in Osaka, Japan, and moved to the UK at 15 years of age. He has won the Serocki International Composers Competition, the Royal Philharmonic Society Award, the Otaka Prize, the Akutagawa Composition Award, the WIRED Audi Innovation Award, the Paul Hindemith Prize, and The Silver Lion Award from Venice Biennale 2017. His works include operas, orchestral pieces, ensemble and chamber works and film scores.

Dai Fujikura's music has been performed in Europe, Asia, and North and South America. He recently held the composer-in-residence position at Nagoya Philharmonic Orchestra. He has received two BBC Proms commissions, his "Double Bass Concerto" was premiered by the London Sinfonietta, and in 2013 the BBC Symphony Orchestra gave the UK premiere of "Atom". Fujikura's "Tocar y Luchar" was premiered under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel with the Simón Bolívar Youth

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Orchestra in Venezuela in 2011.

His music has been performed and/or commissioned by Bamberg Symphony, Munich Chamber Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Philharmonia Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, New Japan Philharmonic and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, among many others. He has collaborated with Ensemble Modern, Arditti Quartet, Ensemble Intercontemporain, International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), Oslo Sinfonietta, Asko Ensemble, Klangforum Wien, and Bit20 Ensemble. Ultraschall Berlin, Lucerne Festival, Salzburg Festival, Punkt Festival, Spoleto Festival, NHK Symphony Orchestra, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, and Tanglewood Festival have all programmed his music, and his works have been conducted by many conductors including Pierre Boulez, Peter Eötvös, Jonathan Nott, Kazuki Yamada, Martyn Brabbins, Peter Rundel and Alexander Liebreich.

Dai Fujikura also has strong connections with the experimental pop/jazz/improvisation world. His co-composition with Ryuichi Sakamoto, peripheral movement for electronics, premiered in Hakuju Hall in Japan in 2013, and his collaborative works with David Sylvian were recorded for Sylvian's album *Died in the Wool*. Jan Bang released an album on Jazzland records, which featured Fujikura's collaborations with Jan Bang and Sidsel Endresen. Dai Fujikura is published by Ricordi Berlin<sup>2</sup>.

Dai Fujikura (DF) was interviewed by Sara Carvalho (SC) and Filipe Lopes (FL) in relation to the project with which he is involved in Japan, namely a composition project for children in Fukushima, Japan. The interview<sup>3</sup> discusses the various aspects of Dai Fujikura's work as a composer and according to his experiences with child composers through the Fukushima project.

**SC: As well as being a composer I hear that you work in Music Education. Would you like to tell us about that?**

**DF:** Yes, well I'm a composer, so most of the time I write music for concerts, orchestra, opera, ensembles, solos and so on. And I write music, so-called contemporary music, experimental music (some people say), whatever - music. And, I run our early music education project in Fukushima, which is part of El Sistema Japan. The model is after El Sistema in Venezuela. I wrote a piece for Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar orchestra, several years ago and because of that I think, El Sistema Japan asked me if I could run a composition course for children. And I said 'Ok, let's do it!' And that's how I got involved. Because I don't live in Japan, I go there twice or three times a year, to run the course; the class consists of children from 4 to 5 years old onwards, and they are all in youth orchestra. And because, this is an

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of Dai Fujikura's recordings, visit <http://www.daifujikura.com/un/discography.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This is an edited version of the interview

important point, this project is funded by Louis Vuitton, therefore it is completely free to take this class, and they can stay or leave anytime they want. There are no strings attached.

So, for this project usually I bring contemporary music specialist musicians, like for instance the principal horn player. We worked together a lot, because this is what I do when I compose music, I collaborate with the musician on a really annoyingly frequent basis. Like, every day or three days a week, on Skype, for hours, which I record. And every time I write music, I take a screenshot, I send it, the musician reads it, then they record it on their iPhone or whatever, and they send it back to me. We do that kind of thing every day... I make music and that's how I do it.

So, I have a similar model for Fukushima. For example, in this case, the horn player comes to Fukushima, and in a room full of kids, I say, 'this is a horn, and this is the pitch range, from here to here'. Now, straight away I introduce them to extended techniques, for instance: "what it is like if you sing and play at the same time?" and then he (the musician) demonstrates.

Another example, the musician demonstrates using of a bass wah-wah mute on the horn for the kids (as I was experimenting with it for one of my own pieces): "What's it like to stick that in a horn? It's for the bass trombone, but if you put it in a horn, what happens?" So, the kids are putting their hands on the wah-wah mute, so it's going to be opened and closed, it has that kind of effect, and that's what we do. So immediately, we give them a pitch range and then go straight on to experimenting sounds. And we give them 30 minutes of instrumental explanation. And then we give them 30 minutes after that to compose. If they like.

So, again, as I said before, there are no fees involved, the only condition is that they are in the orchestra already, so they can read music and they are interested in music. And they can quit anytime, they can walk out anytime during the lesson and they don't have to compose music. I mean, why do you have to compose anything if you don't feel like it? So, those are the conditions. We are running this for three years and there is not a single time that a child didn't compose. All of them composed. And so, for 30 minutes we give them time to compose and after that the musician will come around to experiment: "Can I play some of what you have written?" And so on. And then, so that's now an hour and a half into the class, and after that we will do some kind of mini-concert, so the musician will just sight-read.

By the way, it's super hard music! I have already told them that music for horn, bassoon, or anything, you can play more than one note at a time, with special fingering, or sing and play at the same time, etc. The kids write for all these multiphonics and key-clicks... yeah! Extended techniques. And the children, especially young ones, like 5 year olds, they are the geniuses, they write a lot and then they are very hard on the musician. I always ask after musician plays: "How was it?" And some kids say: 'yeah...it's ok, it's ok'.

“Well, just ask him if you want him to do something”, or “maybe he won’t be able to do that, but he might!” That sort of thing.

And I remember one girl, she’s a very quiet and shy girl, and she wrote music for solo bassoon, full of extended techniques and singing, playing multiphonics, playing chords, on a single bassoon, which is possible, you know... And she had written a diminuendo, and the musician, who was just sight-reading, forgot to do the diminuendo, he was just playing and doing his best. And then she didn’t want to complain because she’s shy, but she took a pencil and drew on top of the diminuendo while he played, and he just stopped and ‘I’m so sorry, I forgot to do the diminuendo, I’ll play again from the beginning’.

And my motto is that I think all small children are geniuses, they can just create, they can write, they can not just create, but they write. What’s important for me is that: “How does one write music for the other to understand what you want them to play?” So, when we have an American musician, they don’t share a language but it is not a problem, the American musician has no problem playing the music that kids in Fukushima wrote. And, as far as I know, it’s been quite creative, and all the kids, they just keep coming back. A problem we have is that children above around 10 years of age are very difficult. I don’t know why... Maybe because they are damaged by adults, at school? They have this blockage, they cannot write music. They ask me: ‘But do we need to have melody?’ I ask them: ‘Do you need a melody? If you need one, write one, but if you don’t need it then you don’t have to write one’.

I remember that at the beginning, the adults, the organisers of this class, project, they said to me: ‘Oh, maybe you can comment on each piece after, at the end of the class’. And I just told them: “No, look at the kids, they don’t care, they are just happy to hear their own music”. And then that’s it! That’s the best outcome, and so let’s not comment on anything. So, I don’t comment, and they just write, the musician plays and then the kids are really happy to hear their own music they have just written, and played by top class musicians! That’s amazing, I think. We have brought Japanese traditional instruments to the class, we brought an American ensemble of 5 instruments: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and percussion, who were visiting Japan for my concerts. And all the kids wanted to write either for flute or percussion. They didn’t want to write at all for oboe, clarinet, or bassoon. So I asked these three American musicians: ‘Ok, now you’re going to go over there and promote your instruments to the kids’. And they went over: ‘Oh, why don’t you want to write music for bassoon? It can do this and it can do this’. And some wrote for them, and some of them played the kids’ compositions at the concert hall in Tokyo, a few days after. And some kids said: ‘Can we play?’ and a boy said: ‘No, how can you play? I won’t be there. I’m the composer, I

should be there'. We managed to convince them that we'd send a recording, and so on, and we managed to play. That was wonderful.

**FL: Is there any memory or musical experience from your childhood that had an impact on you?**

**DF:** Yeah... that's an interesting thing, actually. My mother used to say when I was little, I was playing some sort of drums, behind my father, who was playing the piano (he is amateur pianist). Anyway, he was just playing piano at home, and I was crying because the music was very sad, minor or something, I don't know, so I don't know if this is the answer to this particular question... often people ask me why do I compose music, that episode may have something to do with it...

Also, I had a very good piano teacher, strict, you know, 80's Japanese style, because Japanese style in the 80s was very strict. But I rebelled against all of that. My mother said she doesn't remember me going through a rebellious teenager phase because I was already... you name it, I was against it. I just didn't feel that the piano teacher was right to tell me off. I was aged 7/8/9 years, and I was changing the music, changing for the better, I thought... And my teacher asked: 'What are you doing? It's wrong', and so I just kept changing, I was just doing what I thought; I always thought I was right. Then, I realised, because I'd been told off in every single lesson, I realised, if I compose my own music, no one can tell me off. So that's how I started composing music. And composing, writing, actually writing something down, because people often think of composing, it's playing around on the keyboard, which is great, but what I mean here is actually writing down, notating. Maybe that's why, because I was being told off playing something different from printed music.

That's one reason why I wanted to compose music, and notate it. Because if what is on the page before us is the way I like it, then no-one should tell me off. So that was my childhood memory in music, but come to think of it, I love, I love to do everything opposite, for example writing for horn, music for solo horn, I always disliked the typical horn sound, it's kind of macho, loud, fanfare-like, which is very annoying. I don't know why... I just hate it. So that's a very good place to start writing music for horn, of course. And then I just spent hours and hours on Skype with the horn player asking questions such as: "How can I make the softest sound from horn?" So, one day, on Skype, I could see his room (because he was putting his iPhone facing him), and I could see a lot of mutes, and so on. I just said: "What's that just behind you?" "This one?", he replied, "No, that one", I said, "No that one, can you stick that in your horn, what does it do, how does it sound?". He then started to experiment, and we experimented a lot... some things were not effective, some things were. And then, as I've quite an obsessive nature, I just got real obsessed by that technique and then I wrote the whole piece, a 10-minute solo horn piece, only using that technique. So, the mute doesn't ever come

off, in the whole piece. This mute for bass trombone, not for horn, is used, and makes the softest wah-wah sound, all the way through.

**FL:** In recent decades, in Portugal, there has been an increase in projects involving local communities with musicians and composers. Many of these projects employ graphic notation or no notation at all. It's mostly about memorising tunes and memorising signs. However, in conservatoires children need to learn conventional notation. What do you feel should be the role of notation in early music education?

**DF:** Your question is actually a very important one. I consciously chose, and I don't forbid anything in my class, but I consciously chose not to introduce graphic notation. Because you could just write triangles and circles... graphic notation is much more than that, but one could just decide: "I just write triangles, squares, or scribble, and then the musician will improvise..."

**FL:** Do you feel the kids were able to express themselves?

**DF:** With normal notation? Yes, but that's the funny part, you know. So, for example, with the kids, whatever the style their music is, some kids just write melodies, but the young ones are wild, they just write all these key clicks and tongue-rolling, and they write quite precisely with words and everything. And then it's funny, often the tempo is not written. You know, sometimes they forget the tempo... and then, this is the interesting part, the musician comes in and of course he or she doesn't know how fast it goes. And they ask: "So, how fast is it?" Usually, maybe these kids in Japan are very shy, they say nothing or 'I don't know'. So I just ask the musician: "Ok, why don't you just start playing at the tempo you think it is?" And then, he or she starts playing and immediately the kid says: 'Not that fast', or 'No, that's too slow'. So, my point is that I really think that kids really know exactly what it shouldn't be, you know? Then I ask them: 'So maybe you want to add that to the score?' what kind of tempo it is, and so on. And of course the musicians, -and this is exactly how all the musicians who visit here, or my collaborators for my music-, they all say that this is not different from how they work with me. And sometimes they come and say: "Ok, here I can do a staccato like this, or like that, which one do you prefer?" And it's amazing, that all the kids always say: 'That one, not that one'. Once, I remember that there was a boy who was writing a piece for drum kit. And this child that was playing his piece, said one of the typical things that you actually hear in a professional rehearsal, thought that the rest was too short for the stick changes. And how many times do we hear this in orchestra rehearsals? "This is too much, we have only one beat rest and then you have to change the sticks". "It happens all the time" I replied. So then, they (the child composer and the child percussionist) began to figure it out.

So, I believe it's important that, for my project, that the kids lead their own composition. I don't teach them, I just introduce these sound-worlds, what can be done on these instruments, weird things, strange things, that they don't

have to do, or they don't have to write the notes even, but then often kids just ask the instrumentalists: "can you do it?" or "why can't you do it?" or 'why is your voice so quiet?'

But it's all notated! So, yes, because of conventional notation, western notation, I think it really shows exactly how the kids want the musician to play. Musicians that they never met before. This does not happen with graphic notation. So that is why it was important for me that in this class all the kids are in the orchestra.

**SC:** **There is a lot of debate as to what improvisation is. How do you think improvisation can be approached within music classes and what is the role of improvisation in your own work?**

**DF:** Well, I think that improvisation is a really, really wonderful thing. But for me, I don't know why, but for my own class, this class, I just thought I want to do different things instead of improvisation for the reason that I already explained. And I thought it is quite interesting that the person who made the music doesn't perform, that's what I found interesting. But don't you think that we all have this problem, even over emails, even with your friends? You say something and then the other person completely misunderstands and gets angry, and I think we all know this. But it's not too difficult I think, how to make the other understand what I mean, and what I want them to play. So hence, I thought that it was interesting to do it in a composition format, for this particular project.

**SC:** **Is there such thing as writing music for children?**

**DF:** Ah, actually, yes it's a very good point. But unfortunately I don't really have many pieces that I specifically wrote for children. I just finished my second opera; it's called *The Goldbug*. It's from Edgar Allen Poe's short story, but it is for children to watch, not for children to play. That was basically a request from the Basel Theatre. I don't know why, but they told me that in Switzerland it's quite difficult to engage boys, more than girls. They think girls can sit during an opera and watch the show, and engage in it. I don't know much about children's opera, but quite often it's to do with princesses or princes, or all those things. And they can't contain, "control" the boys. They're bored, they don't want to watch, so they asked me: "Dai, can you come up with a topic which has something attractive for boys?" I know it's a generalisation, but that's what I was asked for by the team from Basel.

And then I searched and found the *Goldbug*, I thought it was perfect because it's basically about finding the pirates' treasure. In the original story we have three middle aged men looking for the *Goldbug*, and then the *Goldbug* leads to the treasure; in my opera we changed it quite a lot, and we have child roles, and so on.

So, another thing that is a problem. At least, I find it's a problem with my music, and maybe new music, with the contemporary music world - all this new music, including mine, it is just too difficult to play. Too difficult to

perform, I don't know... I think it's a problem. I keep doing my best, but I wish there was music that children could actually perform. So I think that's probably one of the reasons there's a big gap between the old music today and much of the new music. Modern new music is too difficult.

**FL: It seems there is a blurred line between being a performer and being a composer. Many people nowadays perform and compose their own music. How do you imagine the musician of the future? What characteristics do you think musicians should have and what should be practice with children?**

**DF:** Well, I think things are getting better, because I remember when I was in music college, and I'm 40 years old, so 20 years ago, I remember that some instrumental teacher was forbidding their student, my friend, to play my music. Because they thought that no good music comes after, I don't know, Shostakovich or something. So I had to go to each teacher, and say 'what you're doing is wrong, students should play any kind of music that is suitable to play, including that of the beginning composer, especially the composer they're friends with'. And collaborations with musicians and composer are very important. But that was 20 years ago. I think that now students play all kinds of music. I have always collaborated with musicians, pop musicians, jazz musicians, and so on, and I have learned an enormous amount from those musicians. Especially the ones who don't read music, because their ear is incredible. Here I am worrying that 'this F is a bit out of tune' and so on, but they, those jazz and pop musicians say things like 'I don't know about that, but don't you think it's the whole sound balance that is completely wrong?' I'm just think 'wow!' because I'm just focused on the pitches, and harmony and so on, they say 'who cares about that? The whole sound balance is wrong!' It's like a new way of listening to music. For me, at least, I learned things I couldn't have learned from classical music.

I strongly believe that the music is collaboration. Collaboration between the person who writes music, the person who performs this music, and the person who organises the concert, because without organisation there's no concert. Organisation is a very important thing. And then, the audience who listens to the music. So, four elements. I mean, this a very simplified version, but if any of those 4 elements are lacking there would be no music. The music has sound, you know, I always joke that the notation on the paper, is just dots on a page. It means nothing. Music is something that we have to hear. And to be able to hear the music, there are so many things involved, I think. I mean, this is different from painting. You paint something, and then you can look at it, bring your friends and to see it. But if you write, let's say G, for 1<sup>st</sup> violin. I mean, to hear that note can you imagine how many things you need? You need musicians. Where do you rehearse? Do you need an orchestra? Do you need a conductor? How much do they cost? A lot of things. I'm sure that 20 visual artists, 20 people can make one artwork together, I'm sure that kind of thing is possible. But it's quite an amazing thing



that kids and people from all kinds of backgrounds can be in one place, to play music together. To make one sound together. I don't know of any other art form where you can make art in that instant. I understand the movies and so on, which also involve collaboration, scriptwriters and actors and directors and so on. But the thing about music is that it's happening at this moment. And if you are playing music from the past, it's quite also an amazing thing that some guy, maybe an Austrian guy from the 18<sup>th</sup> century for example, wrote this note, and 200 years later these people from all over the world, they are here in this place and they're at one, making that sound together. I think that's a kind of incredible art form.

**SC and FL: Dai, thank you very much.**