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# Plucking the Strings

BY CASEY RYAN VOCK



Photo Provided

HIROYA TSUKAMOTO has been making music for most of his life, but through what he describes as his close relationship with the acoustic guitar, he's come into his own as a visionary composer and a breathtaking performer who conjures a fascinating sound.

"Guitar is a very personal instrument, and since I have been playing for many years, it is almost like a buddy," says Tsukamoto. "And when I play music, I feel like I can be myself."

A native of Kyoto, Japan, Tsukamoto is set to perform at BluSeed Studios in Saranac Lake on Nov. 2, offering local concertgoers the chance to see and hear this masterful artist tenderly pluck the strings and leverage multi-instrumental knowhow in achieving his own restorative form of world music.

Tsukamoto's admired for the flowing, intricate fingerstyle he's wielded on his five solo albums, most recently 2023's *Little River Canyon*. He's made numerous appearances in Acoustic Guitar Magazine as the subject of features and album reviews; his fingerpicking has been applauded as "delicate, fluid and beautifully detailed."

He's also written articles and created video lessons, sharing his expertise on various tunings and the use of live looping to create a far-reaching vibrance that might seem impossible for an acoustic guitar.

"One thing is that I don't play guitar in standard tuning at shows," says the 49-year-old musician. "I use open turning called 'DADGAD,' and that makes the guitar resonate. And I don't play normal chord forms or shapes. [...] When I compose music, I don't really think about style or genre."

His presentation combines music and anecdotes, and those who've seen Tsukamoto play live have referred to the experience as "transformative" and "ethereal." With the addition of his enchanting vocals, employed in timely fashion on the stage and on his recordings, he augments the spiritual allure and meditative power of his music.

"I don't know how to describe it exactly," he says, "but I often use voice as an instrument doubling the melody line."

Tsukamoto's singular approach comes from decades of making songs and living on opposite sides of the globe. In Kyoto, he grew up listening to American acts from the 1960s and '70s — groups like The Carpenters and others his

parents kept on rotation. At a young age, he found himself coming up with melodies on a recorder.

In his early teen years, Tsukamoto picked up the five-string banjo. Many hours of practicing patterns honed his skills, but he had no outlet for string band music. By the time he was in high school, he was listening to rock 'n' roll and had begun playing electric guitar.

When he came to the United States in 2000 to attend the Berklee College of Music on scholarship, Tsukamoto's focus would shift to jazz music. Meanwhile, he worked to fit into a culture essentially new to him.

"The education and communication system are very different from the U.S., and it was challenging to adjust because how we present ourselves is different," says Tsukamoto. "Here, people are more individuals and independent, but [in] Japan, it is more society-based culture."

Though he'd studied English for six years as a student, he found real-life application to be "a different story," and hence, he developed most of his understanding of the language after coming to the U.S.

At Berklee, he met and formed friendships with players who also traveled from abroad. And he eventually formed Interoceánico, a Boston-based outfit comprised of international musicians. Across three studio albums, Tsukamoto proved himself as an orchestrator, managing the arrangements for the eight-piece group.

The experience inspired him to forge his own path, where he could emulate the artists who influenced him the most, including jazz guitarist Pat Metheny and bluegrass banjoist Noam Pikelný.

Armed with knowledge, skill and determination, Tsukamoto has accomplished an orchestral sound as a solo recording and touring musician, and on his website, numerous testimonials from concert organizers glow with praise for his heartfelt engagement and execution in a live setting.

But he's raised his profile in other ways, too, such as playing at the famous Blue Note Jazz Club in New York City. He's performed at the United Nations and on Japanese National Television (NHK). In 2018, Tsukamoto took second place at the International Fingerstyle Guitar Championship.

Four years later, he did it again, earning second-place honors for a second time at the high-profile competition.

Since devoting himself to the acoustic guitar about 15 years ago, he's grown a catalogue of sweeping compositions and rearranged traditional songs, like his captivating take on the traditional British folk piece "Water is Wide," recorded to his 2021 album, *Window to the World*.

Now based in New York City, Tsukamoto can clearly see a "pure" interaction between himself and his songs, and he's aware of how far it's taken him. Having grown up in what he considers a small town, "surrounded by mountains," he embraces the chance to visit rural areas and interact with townsfolk.

"I like going through small towns across the country as I see interesting spots and meet unique people," says Tsukamoto. He's played several previous gigs in the Adirondacks and is excited to return on a fall tour that sees him making stops throughout the Northeast. "When I played in the area in the past, I did a little trail walking in the Adirondacks, which was beautiful. I had a great time when I played in Saranac Lake a couple of years ago. [...] I enjoy hearing their stories too, and sometime, those people inspire me to write a new song."

As he does each night out, he'll look to guide his audience "to a different time and place" and will strive to make the most out of the upcoming appearance, both personally and professionally.

"As a performer, I just want to be better at what I do each show, so playing [...] is almost like a training," he says. "After the show, I analyze what I can do better and prepare for the next one. It is a lifetime practice to me."

*Hiroya Tsukamoto will perform on Nov. 2 at 6:30 p.m. at BluSeed Studios in Saranac Lake. Tickets cost \$25 for adults, and the concert is free for children ages 12 and under. For more information and/or to purchase tickets, visit [bluseedstudios.org](http://bluseedstudios.org).*



Photo by Gary Alter

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