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MUSIC

# Meet Tomoko Mukaiyama, a Badass Pianist Upending the Traditional Composer-Musician Hierarchy in Symphonic Music

by [Rich Smith](#) • May 12, 2016 at 1:07 pm

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**Conceptual artist/pianist, Tomoko Mukaiyama, giving the composer-musician hierarchy the cold shoulder.** BEN VAN HOUTEN

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Despite the overenthusiastic name, **Sonic Evolution: This is Indie!**, which is happening tomorrow at **Benaroya Hall**, is going to be an intense, gorgeous, multimedia musical spectacle. I'm particularly pumped about the world premier of the audio/visual symphony ***The Unchanging Sea***, a collaboration between avant-garde filmmaker **Bill Morrison** and **Bang on a Can** cofounder Michael Gordon. Along with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, pianist Tomoko Mukaiyama will pound out Gordon's dense yet expansive rhythm-heavy composition below a projection of Morrison's short film, which is full of **old, decaying, archival footage** of Seattle.

Mukaiyama is one of the more fascinating pianists to watch. In 2003, she performed a 15-minute piano concert called *For You*. An audience of one would sit **alone** in a big concert hall, and Mukaiyama would play the piece.

"You think you know what a concert is," Mukaiyama told me when I met with her at Benaroya Hall last week, "but if you go and sit there in a sea of empty seats—you are lost." She said people didn't know how to react when she walked onstage, which was unsettling. "[The audience member] would have to take the huge experience of being at a concert alone—**that's too much responsibility for one person**," she said. "People cried. They couldn't move."

In another performance called ***SHOES***, Mukaiyama explored connections between fashion and music, changing her costume every so often throughout the show. At one point, **a pile of shoes rained down on her head**.

Mukaiyama hasn't always taken an avant-garde, interdisciplinary approach to playing. She received a pretty orthodox classical training at the Jacobs School of Music in Indiana University (formally IU School of Music), one of the best music programs in the country. But she pointed to a clear turning point, where she shifted away from being just a piano player.

Fifteen years ago in a concert hall in Amsterdam, Netherlands, where she lives, a pianist named Maurizio Pollini came to play a series of Beethoven's sonatas. He played the second movement of one of the sonatas too slowly for the tastes of some, and a lot of people booed and criticized him.

Mukaiyama thought that critical response was unfair. For her, **the pianist could also be a creator of the music**, making new interpretations of it, changing the pacing and the mood.

"I got the sense of a definite hierarchy—on the top is the composer and on the bottom is the musician," she said. "The pianist can never be a creator. I couldn't stand that idea."

At that moment she decided **she was too free** to only play the role of a musician, a technician responsible only for reproducing a piece of work the way it "should" be produced according to the composer or a conductor's vision.

Though shoes won't be raining down on her head at Benaroya Hall, Mukaiyama said her performance of *The Unchanging Sea* will be very physical. "It's exploring the sound of piano—it's very virtuoso, very quick and loud." During practice, she said Gordon would push her to play faster and harder. "Every time I thought, 'This is it, I can't do more,' but then it goes on. It's always possible to do more."

And though it doesn't appear as if Mukaiyama will make changes to the piece the way Pollini made changes to those Beethoven sonatas, the collaborative nature of the composition puts her in the position of realizing the ideas underpinning Gordon's music. Tomorrow will be the first time that an audience has ever heard the piece, so she'll get to establish the style for future performances. "I feel very free with this," she said.

Right now, the symphony is running a limited time promo for **Sonic Evolution**. Enter ROYALTY during checkout, and tickets to the world premier of this film about Seattle that's scored by a world-renowned composer and brought to life by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and **the badass pianist I've been talking to you about this whole time** will only set you back \$15.

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