

“Masashi Yamamoto Contrabass Solo – The Unplugged Theatre”
“Yumiko Tanaka Recital 2024 – The Sonic World of Gidayu Shamisen”
announced winning performances of
the 24th Keizo Saji Prize for 2024



The Suntory Foundation for the Arts (Directors General: Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi and Shingo Torii) has announced that the 24th (2024) Keizo Saji Prize, bestowed on candidates selected from among those who gave predominantly music-based public performances held in Japan during the year, with winner chosen based on a willingness to challenge and on superior performance that engender a strong reaction, has been awarded to “Masashi Yamamoto Contrabass Solo – The Unplugged Theatre” and “Yumiko Tanaka Recital 2024 – The Sonic World of Gidayu Shamisen”.

▽**Selection process**

A qualifying round was held on Sunday, January 26, 2025 at the conference room of the foundation to consider applicants who had given public performances in 2024. After long discussion, “Masashi Yamamoto Contrabass Solo – The Unplugged Theatre” and “Yumiko Tanaka Recital 2024 – The Sonic World of Gidayu Shamisen” were chosen as the recipient of the 24th (2024) Keizo Saji Prize, a decision that received the formal agreement of the Board of Directors of the Foundation on Monday, March 17, 2025.

▽Prize-money ¥2,000,000. ¥1,000,000 will be given for each.

▽The members of the selection committee

Yuta Asai, Seiji Choki, Seiko Ito, Takayuki Komuro, Mikako Mizuno,
Yoshihiko Nonomura, Yuji Numano, Akeo Okada, Miyuki Shiraishi
(In alphabetical order)

▽Outline

“Masashi Yamamoto Contrabass Solo — The Unplugged Theatre”

Date: 26. January 2024, 7:00 PM / 27. January 3:00 PM (Program A)

27. January 2024, 7:00 PM / 28. January 3:00 PM (Program B)

Venue: Atelier Dai Q Geijutsu, Tokyo, Setagaya-ku

Program A:

John Cage: *The Wonderful Window of Eighteen Springs*

Toshi Ichianagi: *Genration of Space*

Yasunoshin Morita: Impromptu III

(commissioned by Masashi Yamamoto, world premiere)

Masamichi Kinoshita: *Piling up stones IX*

(commissioned by Masashi Yamamoto, world premiere)

Jacob Druckman: *Valentine*

Philippe Boivin: *ZAB ou la Passion selon Saint-Nectaire* (Japan Premiere)

Program B:

Hinako Takagi: *Lost in ____ VI* (commissioned by Masashi Yamamoto, world premiere)

Dai Fujikura: *Bis*

Yasunoshin Morita: Impromptu III

Masamichi Kinoshita: *Piling up stones IX*

Yann Robin: *Myst* (Japan Premiere)

Philippe Boivin: *ZAB ou la Passion selon Saint-Nectaire*

Performer: Masashi Yamamoto (Contrabass)

Organized by Masashi Yamamoto

“Yumiko Tanaka Recital 2024—The Sonic World of Gidayu Shamisen”

Date: 7. December 2024

Venue: ‘Haretara Sorani Mame Maite’ (HareMame Tokyo), Tokyo, Shibuya-ku

Program: Yuji Takahashi: *‘The Man Who Doesn’t Come to See Me’* from Ryojin Hisyo

Kyo Ichinose: *‘Something that Clears My Mind’* from Rojin Hisyo

Improvisation with Kazuhisa Uchihashi

Plays Thelonious Monk with New Little One

Yumiko Tanaka: *‘I was here’* (Premiere)

Before and after of performances, and set changes: Listening Style DJ by

Kaede Adachi “Listen to the Recorded Sonic World”

Performer: Yumiko Tanaka (gidayu shamisen), Kazuhisa Uchihashi (guitar, daxophone),

New Little One / Dairo Suga (Pf.), Tokutaro Hosoi (Gt.), Shu Akimoto (Dr.),

Kaede Adachi (DJ)

Organized by Yumiko Tanaka

▽Reason for the award

“Masashi Yamamoto Contrabass[Double Bass] Solo—The Unplugged Theatre”

Masashi Yamamoto goes beyond his role as a double bassist to take a global perspective on the contemporary music scene and to present works by composers who are often neglected by other performers superbly. Thanks to him, the Japanese contemporary music scene has gained a significantly wider horizon and outlook.

At the Momijizaka Project vol.2 held at Kanagawa Prefectural Music Hall in 2023, Yamamoto gave an extraordinary theatrical performance of Pierre Jodlowski’s live electronic piece in a spacious venue. In contrast, “The Unplugged Theatre” in January 2024 was held in the intimate space of Atelier Dai Q Geijutsu. The concert, held over three days with two different programmes, brought the audience to a state of intense excitement, with focused sound and acts of raucous performance that almost burst the air density in the hall. Such ecstasy in contemporary music is rare in recent years.

Just glancing at the lineup of Programme A – John Cage, Toshi Ichianagi, Yasunoshin Morita, Masamichi Kinoshita, Jacob Druckmann, Philippe Boivin – it is apparent that he is looking at the music world from a different angle from that of conventional double bass players or contemporary players, and moreover from the angle of the present. In Programme B, Hinako Takagi, Dai Fujikura, Yann Robin replaces Cage, Ichianagi, and Druckmann.

The double bass is a large-sized instrument and there are many ways to engage with it.

Yamamoto not only excelled in traditional techniques, but also in unorthodox methods including various extended techniques, playing with mallets, tilting or reversing the instrument, percussive approaches, and playing whilst singing. He managed these acts continuously as if they were normal for the instrument yet always maintaining the tension in each. Viewed from the perspective of extended technique, it's the traditional technique that is "unorthodox". Despite this relativity, the performance never levelled out due to the intensity of Yamamoto's playing.

In Boivin's lengthy work that concluded both programmes, the player and the double bass engaged in a life-sized martial arts fight following the sheets of music laid all over the floor. This was indeed "Unplugged Theatre". Sometimes Yamamoto hid behind the double bass, disappeared from our sight, and also slept beside the instrument. Who was the main character of this theatrical work, the performer or the instrument? Rather, this was a duo of two equals. Just as Yamamoto drew the sound from the double bass, the double bass drew the personality out of Yamamoto. This confrontational approach to the instrument is indeed worthy of the spirit of the Keizo Saji Prize.

(Seiji Choki, Committee Member)

"Yumiko Tanaka Recital 2024 – The Sonic World of Gidayu Shamisen"

This recital was the culmination of the forty-year career of the futozao shamisen player Yumiko Tanaka. In her early years, she took part in the premieres of Yuji Takahashi's *Sugagaki Kuzushi* and *Ongaku no Oshie* and joined the Japanese instrument group "Ito" which Takahashi founded with Kazuko Takada. In this performance, she realised the traditional score of Takahashi's *The Man Who Doesn't Come to See Me* with precision. She met composer Kyo Ichinose through a work commission by "Ito", and co-composed the theatre piece *KIYOH* (2010) with him. His *Something that Clears My Mind*, also premiered on the same day, is a short piece in the neo-pop style in which the use of harmonics, which are not part of shamisen's traditional technique, provides a good accent. Tanaka has been committed to improvised music since the mid-1990s and was recognised internationally as a member of Yoshihide Otomo's band "Ground Zero". Through the band, she became acquainted with fellow member Kazuhisa Uchihashi and appeared regularly at the Festival Beyond Innocence, a festival of improvised music he hosted. Her improvisation with Uchihashi was the highlight of this concert; the intense and intimate 25-minute dialogue, full of respect for each other's musicality, was the driving force behind the award.

The recital was not just a retrospective of her career. As a new initiative, she researched composers currently writing works for shamisen, and commissioned a new work *Jiai to Dai*

Fujikura. During their online exchange Tanaka emphasized the darkness of the traditional repertoire for gidayu shamisen, which resulted in an unusually dark piece for Fujikura. She also took up jazz as a form of “organised improvisation” as opposed to indeterminate improvisation. In choosing a collaborator, her prerequisites were a piano, which she had played before taking on the shamisen, someone who performs regularly with traditional Japanese musicians, and someone with free musicality not bound to jazz form. The choice was narrowed down to Dairo Suga, and they played a cover of Thelonius Monk together with his trio. Although some issues remained since it was their first collaboration, she freely quoted gidayu classics in her performance, something she had suppressed in her improvisation with Uchihashi. This added another dimension to the evaluation.

Finally, in her own composition *I was here*, she brought out the unique sounds of the instrument without being bound by traditional techniques and concluded with a narrative that included her love of the sound which led her to switch to this instrument at university.

This year, the selection process was unprecedented as the candidates’ concerts were concentrated in a short period, and the committee members’ attendance and nominations were split. During the discussion, some withdrew their own nominations and referred to the video material to add their support for the concerts that they didn’t attend. As a result, support for Tanaka’s diverse and high-quality programme increased and led to the award. The friendly atmosphere of Tanaka’s performance may have worked to her favour in the long selection process. At the end, there was a debate over whether to choose her or Masashi Yamamoto’s solo concert which received equal support, but we decided to award them both because we considered their trajectories to be complementary – Tanaka, who started with a traditional career (including contemporary music/contemporary Japanese music) and expanded her activities to improvised music, and Yamamoto, who started out as an electric bass player, performing abroad and at the Fuji Rock Festival with his main band NATSUMEN, and subsequently taking up the double bass and shifting his focus to contemporary double bass music. The committee members all agreed that awarding the prize jointly would demonstrate the breadth of perspectives of the Keizo Saji Prize.

(Yoshihiko Nonomura, Committee Member)

▽Biography

Masashi Yamamoto (Double Bass Performer)

Masashi Yamamoto's activities are centered on double bass solos, and he has made it his mission to revive and pass on contemporary works, especially those that are rarely performed again. On the other hand, he is also active in commissioning works from domestic and foreign composers, and strives to expand the repertoire of solo double bass music. He pursues new musical expression with the double bass, and his solo projects include an elaborate programme of contemporary works for solo double bass and experimental music of his own composition. So far, he has been selected for a joint project with Concert Hall Shizuoka AOI and for the Japan Society for Contemporary Music "Pegasus Concert Vol.VI". In Kanagawa Prefectural Music Hall's "Momijizaka Project Vol.2", he broke new ground in solo performance with a fascinating performance involving video, lighting, and other multimedia. In January 2024, he organised "Masashi Yamamoto Double Bass Solo - The Unplugged Theatre" at Atelier Dai Q Geijutsu. Four performances over three days, all unaccompanied contemporary works only, two different programmes showed the presence of the solo double bass to the maximum.

His performance activities are not limited to Japan, and in recent years he has been in wide contact with composers and performers overseas, giving solo performances in Poland, Germany and France. His solo performance at the Nowy Teatr in Warsaw at the invitation of composer Pierre Jodkowski was featured on the Polish television programme "Informacje kulturalne" and was described as someone with "a very strong concentration, precision and high quality of artistic expression".

As well as this, his own composition "REAL TIME - The Elf in Big f -" won the Grand Prize in the Double Bass & Electronics category of the David Walter Composition Competition organized by the International Society of Bassists, the first Japanese winner in this category. The prize-winning work will be performed again at the 2025 convention in Florida, USA, and he has also been invited as a performer to give a recital.

In addition, he will give a solo recital at the AŻTak Festival of Contemporary Music in Warsaw, which included the premiere of the work by Polish composer Wojtek Blecharz.

As a soloist, he premiered a double bass concerto composed by Yasunoshin Morita. He has given guest performances at Suntory Hall Summer Festival, NHK Symphony Orchestra Music Tomorrow and other events. He also performs as an improviser with various players.

He was born in Kakegawa, Shizuoka, Japan, and completed a special course in music at the Tokyo University of the Arts. He is NATSUMEN bassist and principal double bass player of the Orchestra Triptyque.

Yumiko Tanaka (Gidayu Shamisen player)

Studied musicology at Tokyo University of the Arts and in the master's program at the graduate school. Studied gidayu shamisen and gidayu-bushi under the late Kinshi Nozawa IV of Bunraku puppet theater, the late Juteru Tsuruzawa and Komanosuke Takemoto of Female-Gidayu. She performed as Yumi Tsuruzawa under the charge of the late Koshijidayu Takemoto IV.

She received the Newcomer's Art Encouragement Award in fiscal 1990 from the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and was certified an important intangible cultural property in 2009 as a member of the Gidayu-bushi Preservation Society. She has performed in various music scenes in Japan and abroad, including improvised music, contemporary music, theater music, film music, media art, etc. Her overseas performances span 30 countries around the world. She has performed in Otomo Yoshihide's jazz-rock&noise band "GROUND ZERO," Heiner Goebbels' music theater "Hashirigaki" Basil Twist's contemporary puppet theater "Dogugaeshi".

Released solo album "Tayutauta", DVD "Yumiko Tanaka Music Performance", Co-author of "Marugoto Shamisen no Hon (Book of Shamisen)", and "Ryuichi Sakamoto's schola vol. 14".

She was awarded the Seieikai Foundation Encouragement Prize in 1993, the Japan Music Competition Committee Special Prize in 1999, the Asian Cultural Council Grantee in 2006, and the Agency Cultural Affairs Special Overseas Training Program in 2008. Former associate professor at Hyogo University of Education.

See [here](#) for more on the Keizo Saji Prize

See [here](#) about the Suntory Foundation for the Arts