

Hiromi Uehara, arguably Japan's greatest living jazz musician, and once known for her freakishly big hair, returns to Australia for a series of piano quintet concerts in October



The hair-raising talent of Hiromi

The world's most interesting jazz musician is heading for Australia, writes **JANE CORNWELL**

The higher the hair, the closer to God – or at least, in the case of Japanese pianist and composer Hiromi Uehara, to a creativity so ever-ascending, so apparently infinite, that watching her play can often feel like a religious experience. Onstage, her hair artfully whooshed into a dark cloud rising high above her head, the Grammy-winning virtuoso unleashes a deluge of notes that leap, whirl, tussle and flow, disappearing and reappearing in ways intricate, ambitious and frequently astonishing.

Her performances sparkle with *joie de vivre*, flash with mischievous humor. Sometimes, while she's playing her Yamaha concert grand, or her Clavia keyboards, or the small Korg synth that sits on top of her piano – in succession, or all at once – she'll swing her legs, stamp her feet, get up and run in place.

She might pound the keyboards with her fists, as she did during the opening ceremony of the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympics, clad in black

leggings and a red peplum dress designed by her husband of more than two decades, cult fashion designer Miharu Yasuhiro.

Maybe she'll wig out to a solo by her trumpeter (Adam O'Farrill), like on her much-watched 2023 NPR Tiny Desk Concert. Or she'll tip her head back and gaze steadily at the ceiling, her fingers caressing the keys, in thrall to a higher power. Arguably Japan's greatest living jazz musician, Hiromi has been called "a whirligig of jazz-generating electricity" by the New York Times, and "one of the most remarkable pianists of the last half century" by All Music Guide.

In October, she returns to Australia for a series of piano quintet concerts, their acoustic chamber music vibe speaking to the versatility of both artist and instrument.

"The piano is an orchestra in itself," says Hiromi, 45, effin and animated in her apartment in New York, where she moved after graduating from Berklee College of Music in Boston in the early 2000s.

"Each piano has its own personality; some are sad from underuse.

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Some are properly tuned and happy. I become buddies with every piano I meet. I love the instrument and want people to know its potential."

Having started learning classical piano aged six on an upright meant for her older brother, she was introduced to jazz through her piano teacher, who had jazz piano albums including Errol Garner's 1955 live recording *Concert by the Sea* and Oscar Peterson's 1964 release, *We Get Requests*, on repeat, and who would write "spend a life full of dreams" on each of Hiromi's new music books.

"For me, hearing jazz as a kid was like seeing the keys smiling and dancing," says Hiromi, whose energy and eagerness to learn was such that her mother nicknamed her "Curious George" after the inquisitive cartoon monkey. "I couldn't stop moving my body, which never happened with Bach or Mozart. I loved the improvising. I loved the rhythm called swing. I started putting new sounds in with classical music."

She flashes a smile. "And I've kept on imagining and exploring."

Hiromi was 12 when she travelled to Taiwan to play her first show abroad ("I realised the piano was like a piano; it could take me anywhere"), two years later she was performing with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. She was 17 when a chance meeting with Chick Corea – another American jazz piano icon – changed her life.

"I heard that Chick was rehearsing at the Yamaha building in Tokyo where I was taking lessons," she says. "I loved his music for years and just had to find him and say hi. He asked me to play something, then to improvise, then to improvise with him. Then he invited me to be a guest in his show the next evening."

Briefly a teenaged jingle writer for an ad agency in Japan (there was a Nissan ad starring Mr Bean), she went on to study composition and arranging at Berklee in 1999 under the aegis of mentors including jazz piano hero Ahmed Jamal (for whom she opened at the Umbria Jazz Festival in 2002). Among the many shining talents on campus, Hiromi stood out for her free-wheeling creativity and freakishly big hair: "I did a show after I arrived and the next day someone came up to my friend and said, 'You played amazingly last night.' People couldn't differentiate between Asian people's faces, also because we mostly have black hair. So, I made my hair iconic so that everyone would say, 'OK, that's Hiromi.'"

Produced by Jamal, Hiromi's 2003 debut album *Another Mind* bottled some of the virtuosic unpredictability that, 13 studio albums and countless international performances later, enthralled millions around the world. It introduced us to a mercurial genius whose influences range from Bartok, Debussy and Rachmaninov to Jeff Beck, Nina Simone and Frank Zappa, and whose sound has evolved with every release. In 2007 she recorded the album *Duet* with Chick Corea. In 2011 she won a Grammy for her work with bassist Stanley Clark, and in 2012 she made her live debut in Australia.

Hiromi has been a sporadic visitor to our shores, fronting bands cherry-picked for their collaborative instincts and virtuosic smarts. This time around, for dates including the Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival and Melbourne International Jazz Festival, she's leaving behind her high-energy jazz-funk band Sonicwonder, and will instead be accompanied by PUBLIQuartet, a genre-leaping Grammy-nominated improvising string outfit also from New York City.

"They're like classical musicians but they cross over. The cellist basically plays like a contrabass [double bass] player would in a jazz setting," she says.

"We had an afternoon together rehearsing and that was all we needed. It's so easy to play with them."

Together they'll present *Silver Linings Suite*, the four-movement work that Hiromi wrote in 2020 while grounded in Hamamatsu with her family (her father is an ex-banker, her brother a journalist) during the pandemic. The fear and loss that she felt at the time was compounded by the devastation being wrought on the live music industry.

"I have a long relationship with the Blue Note in Tokyo, which couldn't open as they mainly have these renowned musicians from around the world performing and no one was allowed into the country," she says. "I offered to do a live-streamed show from there called *Save Live Music*. I did 12 solo shows over 16 days for the first edition in August and September 2020, with a limited capacity of 40 per cent. I reunited with a top dancer I'd worked with, then a violinist. I just felt I had to do something."

Hiromi was listening to *Lyric Suite* by Sade, the 1982 album featuring Chick Corea, vibraphonist Gary Burton and a chamber string quartet, when she hit on the idea of writing a suite that would trace her emotional journey through the pandemic. She called Corea (who died in February 2022, aged 79) at his home in Florida to chat it over and, with his encouragement, picked her compositional imagination by setting four empty chairs around her piano.

Something clicked, she says. "I started writing as if I was talking to myself, alone, accessing this deep well of feelings inside of me but also experiencing this thing that everybody everywhere went through," she says. "I knew it was going to work."

Performed with a quartet of Japanese string players on two violins, viola and cello, *Silver Linings Suite* opens with the nervy fractals of *Isolation*, moves into the swirling darkness of *The Unknown*, then the meditative, softly melodic *Drifters*, before the climactic finale, *Fortitude*. "We had to be strong," Hiromi says. "I think of Chick, who I'd normally see two or three times a year at festivals, and who I was meant to be collaborating with on a new piano project. In the world of Covid I couldn't feel that he was gone."

Released in 2022, the album includes compositions based on her *One Minute Portrait* series, a virtual *live* project she showcased on Instagram during the pandemic, among them, the yearning *Someday* (originally performed with bassist Avishai Cohen), and the bemoaned *11:59PM*, a track inspired by the line "The night is long that never finds the day" in *Macbeth* – a Shakespearean take on hope and despair.

"I knew the morning would come, and that the sun would rise again," Hiromi has said. "That's why I kept writing music."

Did she ever hear 29-track score for *Blue Giant*, an animated movie adaptation of the multimillion-selling manga comic series about three teenaged musicians and their rollercoaster ride towards jazz infamy, involved a cast of 30 top-class classical and jazz musicians including Hiromi's piano quartet, and was one of the biggest jazz albums worldwide of 2023. Released the same year, her album *Sonicwonderland* was a maximalist fiesta, "a Covid afterparty" topped only by this year's hyperactive *Out There*, on which Hiromi not only seems to run on the spot but to sprout wings and fly into space. The hair isn't always as wild, or as high, as it once was. The world – or at least, the jazz world – knows who Hiromi is. But the creativity is as dizzying as ever.

"My biggest musical dream is to keep playing all my life," she says. "That's very challenging as you have to keep satisfying yourself at every stage."

She pauses and smiles. "There's nothing bigger than that."

Hiromi performs at Sydney's City Recital Hall on October 24, then tours to Perth, Melbourne and Adelaide.

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