

Press release

4 March, 2025

In the Music and Opera category

The Frontiers of Knowledge Award goes to Toshio Hosokawa for the extraordinary reach of his music, which tends a bridge between the Japanese tradition and contemporary Western aesthetics

- **“With his singular approach based on the exploration of time and the tension between sound and silence,** he creates soundscapes of serene beauty, leaving an indelible impression on audiences the world over,” said the committee in its citation
- **“His genre-spanning scores include milestones in contemporary music,”** the citation continues, among them his operas *Hanjo*, recalling the ritual chants of old Japan, and *Matsukaze*, which deploys an understated but deeply expressive lyricism”
- **Although his family was steeped in traditional Japanese culture,** the young Hosokawa showed little interest and left to train in Germany. There he realized that his true musical voice might be found in his roots, so he returned to Japan to investigate the country’s techniques, traditions and instruments
- **Hosokawa’s work speaks of the duality between civilization and nature and the Japanese people’s heightened perception of the nuclear threat.** The oratorio *Voiceless Voice in Hiroshima* engages with the atom bomb attack on the city of his birth, while his opera *Stilles Meer* and orchestral piece *Meditation. To the Victims of Tsunami* reflect on the impact of the Fukushima nuclear accident

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Music and Opera category has gone in this 17th edition to Toshio Hosokawa for “the extraordinary international reach of his work,” which “has built a bridge between the Japanese musical tradition and contemporary Western aesthetics.” The committee hailed the Japanese composer as “one of the most original and

4 March, 2025

acclaimed creators of our time. His extensive catalog, spanning every genre, is inspired by Zen philosophy and characterized by the use of timbral writing of great rigor and a richness that is entirely original and recognizable.”

His ability to weave multiple Japanese elements into his music, including *gagaku* (music of the Japanese imperial court), *noh* theater, and instruments as integral to the culture as the *shakuhachi*, *shō*, *koto* or *shamisen*, shines through in scores that have become “milestones of contemporary music, like the operas *Hanjo* (2004), recalling the ritual chants of old Japan, and *Matsukaze* (2011), which deploys an understated but profoundly expressive lyricism,” in the words of the committee.

The synthesis between East and West that the laureate embodies is just one of the distinctive characteristics that have earned him the award, according to committee chair Gabriela Ortiz. For this composer and Professor of Composition at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Hosokawa has achieved this combination “in a manner that is both personal and frankly dazzling, with a voice uniquely his own that fuses the two cultures with breathtaking skill. From the formal point of view, in his music silence becomes a structural element, it is part of his musical thought – an element of reflection that he draws from Eastern culture.”

Committee secretary Víctor García de Gomar, Musical Director of Barcelona’s Gran Teatre del Liceu sees Toshio Hosokawa as the continuation of a line – merging Japanese musical tradition with Western classical music – that began with Tōru Takemitsu, while noting that Hosokawa “takes things further, as regards experimentation especially.” Both the awardee and his music, García de Gomar continues, “become a bridge between two cultures. He builds soundscapes full of timeless beauty, marking new horizons of innovation and creativity, with far more developed architectural sound structures. Never visceral, his music nonetheless bears the characteristics of something born from a deep inner expressive force.”

For their fellow committee member, composer and conductor Fabían Panisello, “Hosokawa has a virtue that all composers aspire to: his works appear to have been written in a single stroke, like the letters of the traditional Japanese calligraphy he so admires. Though replete with elements that strive for technical complexity, to the spectator and other musicians they stand as a single piece. There is complexity, but it is all at the service of a single, and therefore simple, form. This union of simplicity and complexity manifests like nowhere else in Toshio Hosokawa’s work.”

Seeing Japan from the West

4 March, 2025

After beginning piano and composition studies in Tokyo, Toshi Hosokawa moved to Germany in 1976 where he studied composition at the Universität der Künste in Berlin under the South Korean master Isang Yun. He then continued his studies with Swiss composer Klaus Huber at the Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg from 1983 to 1986.

Despite coming from a family steeped in Japanese culture – his mother played the koto (a wooden instrument with 13 different-sized strings), and his grandfather practised *ikebana* (traditional flower arrangement) – until moving to Europe Hosokawa had no particular interest in his own traditions. He had to first leave and then, from a distance, come to a new awareness of his roots. “At the age of 20, when I went to Berlin to study, I realized that I was not European, but that I belonged to another tradition.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, while studying in Germany, the young Hosokawa found that the music then in vogue was not the Western music he had admired from his native Japan, but that of other countries far from the Old Continent, like Indonesia, China or Japan. It was in this way that he turned his gaze to the music of his homeland, regarding it with some nostalgia from his European base. And before long, at Yun’s urging, he returned to study it in detail. “I discovered Japanese court music and the music of the bonzes, the Buddhist monks, all those sounds that were part of ritual ceremonies and which I had never even considered before.”

Among his earliest influences were also European composers like the Hungarian György Ligeti or the 2011 Frontiers of Knowledge Award laureate Helmut Lachenmann, with whom he coincided in Berlin as artist-in-residence. From his new perspective, to these he added others drawn from the Eastern tradition, along with Zen Buddhist philosophy or thought.

His name first garnered international attention in the early 1990s with the chamber work series *Landscapes* (1993), but it was the success of his oratorio *Voiceless Voice in Hiroshima* (1989/2001) and his orchestral piece *Circulating Ocean*, premiered by the Vienna Philharmonic at the 2005 Salzburg Festival, which would definitively place his work on the music stands of the world’s top orchestras and concert halls.

The deeply felt influence of the Zen Buddhist tradition

Just as all traditional Japanese arts pursue a communion with nature, Hosokawa does so with his music. He cites among his inspirations *ikebana*, the ancestral flower arranging technique using cut, rootless blooms that survive only briefly before withering, or the cherry blossom season that

4 March, 2025

lasts just a few short weeks. “It is their ephemeral nature - he remarks - that gives these things their beauty, and the same thing happens with music.”

Hosokawa is also drawn to calligraphy for its ability to replicate sound and silence. His music, he explains, finds reflection in that ancestral art: the sound being equivalent to the shape traced by the brush on a blank sheet of paper and the margin signifying the emptiness that is silence. Both are essential to the balance of the work, which can only exist through the combination of its two parts. “Sound and silence are not opposites,” the composer explains. “And nor are light and darkness. They complement and embrace each other. I see them as like the Yin and Yang of Taoism. Opposed but not mutually destructive, they organize themselves to form a single world. Woman and man, strong and weak; they do not fight with each other but raise one another up. I think here of the Japanese tradition, where there is a drum, the *tsuzumi*, that is used in noh theater. This drum is played in such a way that there is a part where there is no sound, which is a moment of tension. But if you don’t have that moment of tension, it can’t make a beautiful sound. The silence implies the sound, which then arrives with more force. Silence and sound meld together. Deep sound implies deep silence and vice versa.”

The awardee proposes a dichotomy between the Western and Eastern conception of musical time, between what he calls “horizontal time and vertical time.” In European music, he contends, time is constructed horizontally by accumulation. Inevitably, the point of comparison is with the Christian tradition and the image of a cathedral being built, its ultimate aim being the connection with an all-powerful God. In the Eastern Zen tradition, conversely, time follows the circular pattern of breathing: “It is an action that comes and goes, in a circle. And in the same instant you have life and death, light and darkness; and the presence of eternity. I wanted to do the same with my music.”

Another distinguishing feature of Hosokawa’s scores, his operas in particular, is the influence of noh theater. In *Vision of Lear* (1998), for instance, he adapts the Shakespearean tragedy with element of this ancient Japanese genre. A feature of these dramas is that the characters are often ghosts, people who have died in another life and arrive on the stage from another world. There they sing, lament, dance and comfort each other, before returning to the land of the spirits. “I am trying to do something similar,” the awardee reflects, “to build bridges between two worlds.”

Nuclear disaster and its aftermath

Hosokawa’s work manifests the Japanese people’s heightened perception of the nuclear threat

4 March, 2025

after the two disasters suffered in the last 80 years. In his aforementioned oratorio *Voiceless Voice in Hiroshima*, Hosokawa engages with the devastation wrought on the city of his birth by the atom bomb at the end of the Second World War, expressed through the brutal tonal world of brass and percussion contrasting with the colorful chordal landscape of the choir.

His own mother is a *hibakusha* – a Japanese term for a bombing survivor – who lived through the experience of the atomic bombs that fell on two of Japan's cities, so nuclear disaster is a subject that resonates personally, and one he has echoed in other pieces. In his 2016 opera *Stilles Meer*, premiered under the baton of Japanese-born Anglo-American conductor Kent Nagano, he reflects on the aftermath of the Fukushima accident and the duality between civilization and nature. Another, orchestral work, *Meditation. To the Victims of Tsunami* (2012), is an elegy that begins as a silent chant and builds into a shrill alarm announcing the impending catastrophe, conveyed through the percussion and the brass.

A feeling of closeness to nature is something else that the Japanese composer owes to his home country. As he puts it, "Japan is a country overflowing with nature. Artists, poets, musicians, architects, invariably think about being part of nature and create their works accordingly. Not to make something opposed to nature, but that forms part of it. That is the goal of our art. For example, a popular instrument in Japanese music is a bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. The sound is not disagreeable, but it has to resemble the wind in nature. Sound is also part of the natural world. That is one of the purposes of sound and it's something I try to achieve with my music. There are concertos, the violin or piano concerto, where there is a soloist, one person. And then the orchestra is the nature that surrounds that person. The soloist tries to be part of nature. You have some small conflicts, but in the end they fade into the sound of nature. That's the music I want to make."

Hosokawa is a prolific author, with an output of nearly 200 scores including concertos for solo instruments, chamber music and film music, as well as orchestral pieces and works for traditional Japanese instruments. He has received numerous recognitions, including first prize in the Berlin Philharmonic's centennial composition competition in 1982. Elected to Berlin's Akademie der Künste in 2001, he has been composer-in-residence at the Venice Biennale (1995, 2001), the Lucerne International Music Festival (2000) and with the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra (1998-2007).

He currently holds a residency with the Orquesta de València, which he initiated in December

4 March, 2025

2024 with the Spanish premiere of his violin concerto *Genesis*, featuring as soloist Veronika Eberle, the superb German violinist who is also the work's dedicatee.

Genesis is a musical journey through a human life, starting from the prenatal stage where the chords conjure the to-and-fro of the amniotic fluid and the harp reproduces the beats of the mother's heart; beats which extend out to embrace all of nature – a second mother – so consumingly important in Japanese art.

Nominator

A total of 41 nominations were received in this edition. The awardee artist was nominated by Gabriel Erkoreka, Composition Professor at Musikene (Euskal Herriko Goi Mailako Musika Ikastegia/Higher School of Music of the Basque Country).

Music and Opera committee and evaluation support panel

The committee in this category was chaired by **Gabriela Ortiz Torres**, composer and Professor of Composition at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with **Víctor García de Gomar**, Artistic Director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona (Spain), acting as secretary.

Remaining members were **Mauro Bucarelli**, Artistic Administrator of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome (Italy); **Silvia Colasanti**, composer (Italy); **Raquel García Tomás**, composer (Spain); **Pedro Halffter Caro**, conductor, composer and member of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de Santa Isabel de Hungría (Spain); **Joan Matabosch**, Artistic Director of the Teatro Real (Spain); and **Fabián Panisello**, Artistic Director of PluralEnsemble (Spain).

The evaluation support panel was coordinated by **Elena Cartea**, Deputy Vice-President for Scientific-Technical Areas at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) and **Luis Calvo Calvo**, CSIC Delegate in Catalonia and Director of the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC) and formed by: **Mariano Gómez Aranda**, Scientific Researcher at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (ILC-CCHS, CSIC); **Luis Antonio González Marin**, Tenured Scientist at the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC); **David Irving**, ICREA Professor at the Mila i Fontanals Institution for Research in the Humanities (IMF, CSIC); and **Laura Touriñan Morandeira**, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of History (IH-CCHS, CSIC).

4 March, 2025

About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and the recognition of talent.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, funded with 400,000 euros in each of their eight categories, recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in science, technology, humanities and music, privileging those that significantly enlarge the stock of knowledge in a discipline, open up new fields, or build bridges between disciplinary areas. The goal of the awards, established in 2008, is to celebrate and promote the value of knowledge as a global public good, the best instrument we have to confront the great challenges of our time and expand individual worldviews. Their eight categories address the knowledge map of the 21st century, from basic knowledge to fields devoted to understanding the natural environment, by way of other, closely connected domains like biology and medicine, economics, information technologies, social sciences and the humanities, and the universal art of music.

The BBVA Foundation is aided in this endeavor by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. CSIC appoints evaluation support panels made up of leading experts in the corresponding knowledge area, who are charged with undertaking an initial assessment of candidates and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees. CSIC is also responsible for designating each committee's chair across the eight prize categories and participates in the selection of remaining members, helping to ensure objectivity in the recognition of innovation and scientific excellence.

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