

HIROMI

A JAZZ PRODIGY COMES OF AGE

Hiromi Uehara is one of jazz's most inspired young voices. A piano prodigy, she was collaborating with musicians all over the world while still in her teens. Today, at age 26, she boasts four critically acclaimed albums. Hiromi has received equal praise for her fiery, percussive keyboard work and for crafting an eclectic group sound informed by classic jazz, fusion, rock, and R&B.

Hiromi is currently on tour promoting her latest Telarc release, *Time Control*. The album features her longtime accompanists, bassist Tony Grey and drummer Martin Vallhora, who've played with her since the three attended Berklee College of Music together, as well as avant-guitarist Dave Fiuczynski.

You started out playing classical piano, but also embraced jazz at a young age.

My first piano teacher in Japan was a big jazz fan, and she had me listening to players like Oscar Peterson and Errol Garner when I was eight years old. She'd explain that what they played wasn't written

down on the paper, and that it was possible to improvise and play what you feel at the moment. I loved that concept! And I wasn't great at reading music anyway, so it was a good excuse! [Laughs.]

You attended a Yamaha music school in Japan. What was that like?

They helped me incorporate music in my life in a very natural way. It wasn't really a conservatory so much as a musical playground. It wasn't some strict teacher hitting my hand with a pen! It was about trying to find something beautiful and exciting in music together with the teacher. Every week was an adventure—it was like taking a trip to the mountains, only in music.

Did you get singled out as a gifted student?

Well, no one ever forced me to do anything. The people around me just encouraged me in what I loved. My hometown, Shizuoka, is very small, and the teachers were really relaxed. My teacher just said, "If you love music, you should keep doing it." I never felt any pressure from anyone, including my parents.

You received recognition from several jazz greats while you were still very young. Chick Corea, for example.

One day when I was seventeen I was practicing at the Yamaha building, and Chick Corea was there for a concert. I went to see the rehearsal, and when I introduced myself, he asked me to play for him. At the concert the next day, he invited me onstage to play a small improvisation with him. Just last September, we did a piano duet again at the Tokyo Jazz Festival.

Ahmad Jamal was a mentor too.

He opened doors for me in the States and hooked me up with my record label, Telarc. Of course, he was a musical influence as well. He never stops creating new things. He could just be playing his old hits, but instead he always pushes himself forward, even at age 75. It's an amazing attitude!

You've said you prefer Yamaha pianos, especially the CFIIIS model. What's the appeal?

It's really percussive, and I tend to use the piano as a percussion instrument. The attack is very fast, so when I play staccato, the notes come back quickly, and I can really play percussive stuff. At the same time, the sound is very warm, especially in the S series pianos. It has a masculine side and a feminine side. The low-register sounds are very strong and bassy, with great attack—it can sound almost like a bass drum or a low tom. At the same time, the treble is high and beautiful, like shining stars. This piano makes my dream of how I want to play come true.

"This piano makes my dream of how I want to play come true."

Your first three albums featured your piano/bass/drums trio. But your latest disc adds a fourth player, guitarist Dave Fiuczynski.

Yes. I've always loved the sound of guitar. I love Frank Zappa, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, John McLaughlin. But guitar is the most difficult instrument for pianists to cope with, because it's chordal. We can clash very easily.

So how do you cope?

I try not to play in the same range. When he plays something low, I play something high. If we do play in the same range, it has to make sense. Also, I need the courage to not play. I always have to listen in a very focused way.

Have you started thinking about your next project?

I'm always thinking about what I can do next. Two things that I want to do in my career are play with an orchestra and play solo piano. I play one or two solo pieces during concerts with my trio or quartet, but I never play solo concerts.

What makes for great solo piano playing?

Complete understanding of the instrument. It's about how much you can please the piano. How much you can make it bloom.