

Jake joins Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra

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Composer Byron Yasui, left, has written the first-ever concerto for the ukulele entitled “Concerto for Ukulele and Orchestra, Campanella.” Ukulele superstar Jake Shimabukuro will perform the piece in a world premiere with the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra. / Courtesy Hawaii Symphony Orchestra

BY STEVEN MARK / smark@staradvertiser.com

Just about everybody in Hawaii has probably picked up an ukulele and given a strum to its four strings, hearing that familiar “My Dog Has Fleas” melody.

That might be about the only familiar thing about composer Byron Yasui's “Concerto for Ukulele and Orchestra, Campanella,” the first ever concerto written for the ukulele. Ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro gives it its world premiere with the Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra this weekend, with symphony artistic adviser JoAnn Falletta conducting.

“This piece is not Hawaiian at all. It's not pop commercial at all, nothing familiar to most people,” said Yasui, a master ukulele player, bassist and classical guitarist as well as respected composer. “It's not like Mozart or Beethoven. It's in a modern style, and there are several degrees of modern styles of music. You have some that's more conservative, and you have some that's really far out. I guess mine is in between.”

The “My Dog Has Fleas” pattern appears in various shapes and different pitch levels throughout the piece, but it might be difficult to recognize.

As a composer would do with any motif, Yasui takes it apart and plays with it. It's backward at the beginning, and sometimes the notes are the same, but played octaves apart. Jagged rhythms hide the pattern as well.

You won't hear anything remotely close to it at a kanikapala, and it's been no day at the beach for Shimabukuro trying to learn the complicated work.

“Ever since I said ‘yes’ to doing this piece, it's been a challenge,” said Shimabukuro, who in addition to recording a new album and maintaining his touring schedule has had matters at home to tend to — his wife Kelly just gave birth to their second son, Cole. “It's like doing a marathon or like the Ironman. When I first got the piece, I couldn't get through two measures without stopping.”

The project got its start about three years ago, when fellow bassist and Hawaii Public Radio host Gary Hickling broached the subject with Yasui.

“He said ‘You're the perfect person to do this,’ because I'm a composer and I'm an ukulele player,” Yasui said. “I said, ‘Sure.’ Easy for me to say OK, but I didn't realize how hard it was going to be.”

HAWAII SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Featuring Jake Shimabukuro, guest ukulele; JoAnn Falletta, conductor

- » **Where:** Blaisdell Concert Hall.
- » **When:** 8 p.m. Saturday, 4 p.m. Sunday
- » **Cost:** \$32-\$92 (\$125 VIP packages available; visit www.hawaiisymphonyorchestra.org or call 946-8742 for details)
- » **Info:** (866) 448-7849, www.ticketmaster.com
- » **Note:** The concert also features Mahler's first symphony, known as Titan

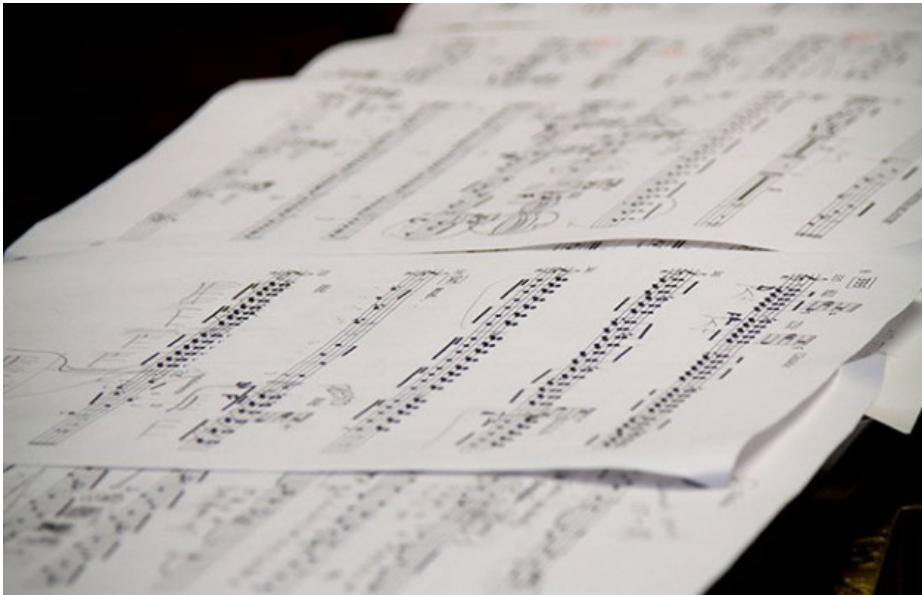
Yasui faced several challenges in writing the work. Though an award-winning composer whose works have been performed in Carnegie Hall, he had never written a concerto before, and had composed only pop tunes for the ukulele. He also had to take into account the ukulele's limited volume, range and sustaining ability, especially in the high notes.

He employs "dissonant clashes, dissonant chords" in complex, dynamic rhythmic patterns in his composition, as if to almost punch through the orchestral sound.

Yasui subtitled the work "campanella" (bells) for a particular effect called for in the piece.

"Say you're playing a scale. Instead of sounding one note at a time, you hold the notes so that the notes overlap and blur," he said. "In order to accomplish that, I had to specify what fingerings to use, what strings to play it on."

Upon receiving a draft of the score in January, Shimabukuro, who usually learns pieces by ear, found the work so daunting that he went looking for a pianist to help him hear the music and learn the notes. He linked up with Brent Nitta, a teacher at the Masaki School of Music and a music doctoral candidate at the University of Washington.



Yasui's score provided plenty of challenges for Shimabukuro. / Courtesy Hawaii Symphony Orchestra

Nitta took one look at the music and thought that would be impossible. Then the two got down to work.

Since then, they're been spending long hours rehearsing, with Nitta playing the orchestral part on piano and Yasui giving advice. The workaholic Shimabukuro has been up past midnight at times practicing.

Shimabukuro said Yasui's piece tests his formidable skills, from the atonality and dissonance of the first movement to the rhythmic complexities and speed of the third. Even the slow second movement, where the "campanella" technique gets prominent display, requires strength and a sensitive ear.

"You have to hold the string down and let that note resonate over the next note," he said. "And even though it's slow, it's this constant tension on your hands the entire time you're playing it."

Shimabukuro also had to learn new strumming patterns for the piece, but possibly his biggest adjustment will be learning to interact with the orchestra in concert. Rehearsals began just this week.

"I've worked with conductors in the past, where they're just following me," he said. "With a piece like this, it's an ensemble. I have to listen to what they're doing and be aware, because I pick up cues from them and play with them."

The work has enhanced the respect the two musicians have for each other. "Dr. Yasui knows everything about ukulele," Shimabukuro said.

"I think I can safely say that Jake is the only person in the world who can play this music," said Yasui, admitting to feeling nervous about audience reception to the work.

Conductor Falletta considers the piece a "very serious work" that will rise to the occasion as the first ever ukulele concerto.

Shimabukuro will also perform the piece with Falletta's Buffalo (N.Y.) Philharmonic Orchestra, one of four mainland orchestras to schedule the piece.

"The orchestra writing is very complicated and very sophisticated, but at the same time it's tremendous fun," Falletta said. "It has a kind of rhythmic vitality that's infectious. It has a dancelike quality to it. ...

"It has a very American feeling to it, a sense of vigor in it, a playfulness at the same time, but also a real lyricism."

Yasui "created a really virtuoso piece," she said. "It's written for a player on the highest level, and I'm glad he did that."