



CHAPTER ONE



Mount Fuji

Early Childhood

(1937–1947)

In April of 1937, two months before Japan entered World War II, Keiko Abe was born in her paternal grandparents' home in the Yoyogi area of Tokyo. It was a traditional Japanese house. And large—large enough that her young parents and their family of two children (the newborn Keiko and her older sister, Kazuko) could reside there comfortably with the elder Abes, their multi-generational family tended by a staff of handmaids wearing traditional Japanese *kimonos*.

But it was within this two-story, twelve-room Japanese home—graced by *tatami* mats and *shoji* screens, and surrounded by a lovely garden and yard—that Keiko Abe's earliest memories were formed. She recalls gazing at Mount Fuji from her room on the second floor. This snow-capped, volcanic mountain, the symbolic and actual center of Japan's landscape, had been revered as sacred for many centuries. From her window, Keiko could feel the power of its serene stillness.

Though her first childhood home was located in the city of Toyko, the only sounds Keiko heard were the quiet calls of birds and the buzzing of insects. The leafy natural setting within a formal garden and yard, carefully tended by groundskeepers, meant that the intimate presence of nature was woven into her daily life—almost from the time of her birth.

But, like most young children, Keiko was sometimes afraid of the dark, and there were times at night when the traditionally spare rooms of the big house made her feel lonely and afraid. She might be startled by a bird calling suddenly in the night, or see shadows cast by a lantern glowing in the darkened garden. Her grandmother, she recalls, made her sleep alone, and was generally quite strict in the behavior she required of young children. And so, every night, Keiko would kneel behind the *shoji* screen in her room to say *Oyasumi nasai* (Good night) to her grandmother, as she had been taught to do.

There were many wonderful times in the Yoyogi house. Keiko played happily with her older sister in their garden. And when she was three, her younger brother, Mikio, was born. Best of all, she enjoyed being outdoors with her mother, Fumiko Abe. A talented, serious artist, Keiko's mother drew and painted as her way of experiencing life. By drawing something, she felt it, understood it, made its life part of hers. And she shared this love of art with her younger daughter, who was fascinated by her mother's sensitive drawings and oils.

When Keiko was a little older, she had her own pencils, paints, and sketchpad which she used to draw the many forms and colors she found in nature—forms and colors her mother pointed out, while teaching her to look closely and observe carefully. Fumiko took Keiko with her each week on outdoor trips to paint in nature, and introduced her daughter to art galleries, as well, so Keiko became acquainted, early on, with publicly sharing art's enjoyment and meaning.

She was fortunate, not only in having a mother who was an artist; Keiko's father was an artist, as well—a dedicated amateur musician. By profession a physician, Yukichi Abe loved to play the piano and the accordion. His father had purchased a grand piano when his two sons were young, and installed it in a Western-style room within their home, so they might learn to play. But Keiko's father was the only son blessed with musical talent, and after taking piano lessons as a boy, he later taught himself to play popular music (he listened to classical symphonies

as well as more popular songs on his record player), in order to accompany singing. Then, once a month, Yukichi held an informal concert in the Western-style music room for the enjoyment of all the family handmaids and servants. As it happened, his wife, Fumiko, played the *koto*, a traditional Japanese stringed instrument. She was also an accomplished amateur performer. So Keiko was of course influenced by both her parents' love of music and performing. As soon as she could climb up on a piano bench, she began playing with her father's piano, spending hours imitating the music she heard him play. The young Keiko experimented with sounds, carefully noticing each sound she could create by pressing the black and white keys in different combinations and tempos.

Her grandmother apparently approved, for she did not send Keiko outside to play. But perhaps part of the grandmother's need to be strict had come from the fact that her husband, Umao Abe, a highly educated man who lived and studied in England for over seven years, had died in 1938, when Keiko was just one year old. Masa Abe then became the head of their large Yoyogi household.

Keiko's paternal grandfather had been a lover of the arts, as well. Even though his successful career was as Vice Minister of Finance, and later Director, of the Kangin Bank of Japan, he was a collector of calligraphy and painting, and supported young artists as a patron. He was unusual in another way, too, in that international travel was unheard of in the early twentieth century among upper class Japanese, and Abe had studied abroad, learning Western ways and culture.

But a year after the death of Umao Abe, another fateful event occurred in the Abe household. Keiko's father, who was then a doctor in the Japanese army, was sent off to China for many months in 1939 (following Japan's invasion of Nanking in 1937). Yukichi Abe had completed his medical training at Keio University Medical School, specializing in public health. While attending medical school, he befriended Nobuyuki Hasue, a young man who came from a family of physicians. Coincidentally, Nobuyuki's father, like his own father, actively supported promising young painters. And Nobuyuki's mother, a highly educated woman for her time, was also interested in art and music.

Most fortuitously, Nobuyuki introduced Yukichi to his future wife. Nobuyuki's sister, Fumiko Hasue, was an artist who began her training in college, and later studied privately for a year with a famous artist. In

the 1930s in Japan, women were not expected to have a job or career, much less an independent way of thinking, so Fumiko's interests and ideas were considered quite unusual. But her artistic talents suited Yukichi perfectly, and the couple married soon after being introduced by Fumiko's brother.

Meanwhile, two years after Yukichi Abe's initial tour of duty in China, he was sent back to that country again, this time from 1941 through 1942. His absence proved a disaster for his family. While Dr. Abe was serving with the Japanese army, and could do nothing to prevent it, the family lost their home in Yoyogi as well as the family fortune. Fumiko Abe was forced to move with her three young children into a small house in Setagaya, a few kilometers west of Yoyogi, that her older brother, Hideo Hasue, rented to them.¹

When Dr. Abe returned from the war with China in 1942, Keiko was five years old. Encouraged by her father's example, she started taking piano lessons. And even though the house in Setagaya was too small for a piano, there was an electric organ. Keiko recalls improvising a melody and accompaniment, being moved to express her feelings about a beautiful moonlit evening in music. The impulse to share her music was present even at that early age, and she remembers walking around her neighborhood singing a song she'd made up. Later on, she picked flowers from her family's garden to offer the neighboring housewives, and enjoyed equally singing and presenting others with beautiful flowers.

This time in Setagaya was a short but happy interlude for Keiko, as there were now four young children in her family (her youngest brother, Masao, was born in 1942), and with both her parents at home, there was warmth and love, as well as music and art.

Two years later, in 1944, the war made life for the Abe family more difficult. Keiko was in the first grade and her lessons were often interrupted by air raid sirens. Children hid under their desks until the "all clear" announcement came, or else they were evacuated to bomb shelters, until they could return to their classrooms. Then, one day, the war intruded even more directly.

Keiko's mother had set off to visit her sister, with Keiko walking beside her as she pushed Mikio's baby carriage and carried Masao on her back (Kazuko stayed home that day). As they approached the sister's house

in the Sangenjaya area of Tokyo, they heard the sound of air raid sirens. Keiko's mother told her to hurry, but as they crossed a busy intersection where three roads converged with some train tracks, sirens screamed through the air, right where they were. Beginning to run, then, they could hear the screeching sound of an airplane behind them. "Hide behind the pole," Fumiko told Keiko. As she crouched down, her mother shielded all three of her children, telling Keiko to close her eyes and not move. Keiko obeyed and, even though she was scared, felt safe because her mother was there. After what seemed like a long time, the airplane flew away. Everything was quiet. As they stood up, Keiko's mother said, "Don't look back." But, this time, Keiko did not obey, and she can still see people lying on the street—as if they had unaccountably fallen asleep.²

By 1945, the continuous bombing of Tokyo by the Americans had begun. Those families who could do so sent their children out of the city to safety. The four Abe children went to stay with their maternal grandparents, the Hasues, in Manaita in the Saitama Prefecture, where they remained until the war was finally over, in the fall of that year. Keiko's cousins (her uncle's children) were also sent to Manaita, and all the children enjoyed playing together in the countryside, among the rice and corn fields, the tall trees, and the abundant wildlife. Their fun as a large group of children was overshadowed by the fear they felt for their parents, who were still in Tokyo protecting their houses from fires (with their neighbors, they organized into local fire-fighting teams). But one night, Keiko, her siblings, and cousins went outside to look at the strange sky. When she saw the red sky in the distance where she knew Tokyo was, Keiko cried. She was so afraid for her parents in the burning city.

Finally, in August of 1945, Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan and the end of World War II. The four Abe children went home to Setagaya, where they found a very different city from the one they had left. While their own house had not been destroyed, the devastation of Tokyo was unimaginably complete. Vast tracts of houses and other buildings had been burned to the ground, and nearly seventy percent of the city was turned to ashes and rubble by both firebombs and bombs. Since most houses were made of wood, entire neighborhoods easily disappeared in the flames, and hundreds of thousands of people died.

Even so, the aftermath of the war was a strangely peaceful time for the Abes. They were all together again, the air raid sirens were silent, the

CHAPTER SEVEN



Origins of the Xylophone and Marimba

The five chapters of Part II offer a comprehensive look at the history of the xylophone and the marimba—how they are, at first, very intertwined, but ultimately separate—as the marimba evolves into a concert instrument, because of Keiko Abe’s activities, over several decades. Abe worked with Yamaha, the instrument manufacturer, to produce several generations of marimbas that ultimately culminated in today’s standard concert instrument, the five-octave marimba. She had the vision and the expertise to work with musical engineers to create a new kind of instrument, one capable of expressing the beautiful and complex music that she’d heard for so long in her inner ear. This new marimba had the capacity to be a full-fledged solo instrument, as well as a member of ensembles and orchestras performing classical music. As this section points out, the marimba began as an ethnic instrument, then moved into popular music, and finally, with Keiko Abe’s vision, has taken the stage as a true concert instrument.

This second section of the book also explores the history of music written for these two instruments, focusing first on the story of popular and serious music for the xylophone, and later the marimba, followed by

the movement into art music and classical music for the marimba, again a result of Keiko Abe's activities, over time. For Abe was a pioneer in commissioning composers to write specifically for her instrument, rather than, as had been the case for so long, creating transcriptions of music written for violin or piano. She also composed her own art music, in addition to working closely with composers as a collaborator, to effectively use all the possibilities the marimba presented. As a result of Abe's activities over decades, both the marimba and the music written for it have evolved and achieved a range and complexity unheard-of before she appeared on the international music scene.

The next chapters provide a history of the xylophone and the marimba along with the compositional elements of the music written for these instruments. This history also ties into Keiko Abe's life and shows how she has caused the marimba to evolve into a distinct concert instrument capable of being performed on the classical music stage with equally evolved music that explores and uses artistically all the capabilities of the instrument and the performer.



The marimba and xylophone are percussion instruments made of specially shaped and tuned pieces of wood (or other material) that produce musical sounds by being struck with mallets. The history of this type of instrument is ancient; it has been found in almost every culture and on almost every continent of the world, while the origins of these instruments' names reveal the geographical regions of the world where they flourished. The word *xylophone* is Greek: *xylos* meaning wood, and *phono* meaning sound. The word *marimba* is from the African Bantu language, and is used to describe a "xylophone with individual resonators beneath each bar"¹⁰⁸ Today, both ethnic marimbas and xylophones, as well as modern marimbas and xylophones, are used in the classical, jazz, and pop musical idioms.

Evidence of the prehistoric origins of marimba-like instruments has been found not only in southern Europe but in Southeast Asia. In 1954, a set of tuned stones was found at an archaeological site in Vietnam. The kind of stone that produces a ringing sound when struck is called *schist*. Estimated to be more than 5,000 years old, this schist stone marimba may

be the oldest known musical instrument in the world. It has seven stones, cut into shapes that vibrate easily, tuned to the pitches of a Javanese musical scale. They respond to a slight touch, producing a musical sound. The stones are each about two inches thick and six inches wide, ranging in length from twenty-six inches to forty inches.¹⁰⁹

In Greece, archeologists have also found an ancient musical instrument made from stones. Burton Jackson describes this instrument in his master's thesis: "A marimba-like instrument with a keyboard of slab-type keys was a rare specimen found in Greece. Officially dated at 2300 B.C., is has been cut from solid stone and set with jewels, and has resonators."¹¹⁰

By looking at these instruments historically and culturally, we find that the xylophone and marimba each reached us today via two very different routes. The xylophone came to the United States from Asia and Eastern Europe through Western Europe in the form of the *strohfiedel* (*straw fiddle*). The marimba came from Indonesia and Africa through Central America, where it was developed into a distinctly Guatemalan and Mexican instrument. Both of these ethnic instruments were used for musical performances in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, there was a very active musical life in almost every town across the United States: performances by military and community bands, musicians in various types of entertainment and theater productions, and family music-making at home. The xylophone was very popular and many manufacturers began producing them. At the same time, marimba bands from Mexico and Guatemala toured the United States, appearing at expositions and world's fairs, thus exposing the public to this instrument.

During this period, the most important difference between the xylophone and the marimba was clearly understood—xylophones did not have resonators while marimbas did. The sound of the xylophone was loud and short, while the sound of the marimba was softer and more resonant, with a characteristic buzzing sound, due to the vibrating membrane attached to each resonator. But as musical instrument manufacturers learned more about Central American marimbas and the principals of acoustics, they added some marimba elements to the *strohfiedel*, and created the modern xylophone. Four key elements were added: chromatic bars, resonators to amplify the sound (without the buzzing membrane), an extended pitch range, and a frame placed on a stand. This hybrid instrument became

the standard xylophone, yet when it was built with a larger pitch range, extending the bass end of the instrument an octave lower, it was sometimes referred to (somewhat ambiguously) as a marimba.

But it was another fifty years before the sound and design of the concert marimba and concert xylophone gradually diverged into two distinct instruments—each with its own unique sound characteristics, playing techniques, idiomatic writing, and musical repertoire.

THE EUROPEAN XYLOPHONE

Ancient Roots

At least two different designs of xylophone were used in many areas of Europe: the *ranat* in Northern Europe, Scandinavia, and Germany, and the *strohfiedel* in Eastern Europe, used by the Russians, Poles, and Tartars.¹¹¹ These European xylophones probably came from Asia where tuned idiophones had existed for thousands of years in China, Japan, and Indonesia. The *ranat* was a trough xylophone with five to eight bars suspended over a resonating box. China and Japan can point to similar instruments existing within their ancient history. The *strohfiedel* was simply a collection of tuned lengths of wood, laid out on any convenient surface, such as a table.

There is a wide variety in the construction of these instruments in various parts of the world. People used materials that were readily available. Wooden xylophones existed in forested areas where trees with resonant wood grew. Bamboo instruments were made in Malaysia. And bronze instruments were made in Indonesia (the sound of the bronze xylophones complimenting the sound of the tuned bronze gongs of the gamelan orchestra).

The xylophone was mentioned in a number of European books about musical instruments in the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sometimes with illustrations. In 1529, Martin Agricola (music theorist, 1486-1556) in his treatise, *Musica instrumentalis deudsch*, referred to an instrument made up of a series of twenty-five wooden bars as a *strohfiedel*. In 1620, Michael Praetorius (organist and composer, 1571-1621) in *Theatrum instrumentorum*, the illustrated second volume of his treatise, *Syntagma musicum*, showed a series of fifteen bars arranged in a pyramid fashion.¹¹²