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Megumi  
Kanda

Premiers New  
Trombone Concerto





Megumi Kanda with the author, Mark Hoelscher

## Trombone Concerto Premiere in Milwaukee

# Megumi Kanda Plays Geoffrey Gordon's **Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra**

**I**t's not often that a trombonist has the opportunity to perform a concerto with an orchestra, but it's far less often that a trombonist gets to perform a concerto that was written for him or her.

When Megumi Kanda, principal trombonist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra played Geoffrey Gordon's *Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra*, she performed a piece that had been written with her musical taste and strengths in mind.

The opportunity arose when MSO music director Edo de Waart asked Kanda to perform a concerto with the orchestra in the 2010–2011 season, she accepted the offer and began looking for a piece to play, eventually narrowing the field to a handful of choices.

"I was looking at the pieces and thinking that they were all pretty cool, but I wasn't sure about any of them," Kanda said. She told her husband, MSO horn player Dietrich Hemann, that what she really needed was for someone to write a "really awesome piece" for her.

The very next day a friend of Hemann's called from Chicago to say that he knew of a composer who had received a grant to write a concerto for a principal player in a major American orchestra. He thought Kanda and the composer should talk about it.

"I thought this was just meant to be," Kanda said. Kanda and Gordon agreed to meet to talk about the project, which was a simple matter since Kanda lives in Milwaukee and Gordon divides his time between New York and the Milwaukee area.

The pair had the first of what would be many meetings, sitting in a coffee shop, getting to know one another and talking music.

"Before our first meeting I went to his web site and listened to his music to make sure I wasn't going to be putting myself in a bad position—because I was going to be the one to pay dearly," Kanda said. "I was going to be the one working on the concerto for months. But I liked what I heard and I thought this was going to work out."

She arrived at their first meeting with CDs and scores of trombone concertos she thinks are really well written. But Gordon wanted to know more about Kanda than just what music she appreciated.

"I asked her what drew her to the trombone," Gordon said, "and she talked about the expressive, lyrical nature of the instrument."

"My goal is always to write music that is idiomatic and pleasing for the player to play—that's huge for me when I'm writing," Gordon said. "Quite honestly if you don't have the player on your side, the

**Megumi Kanda** is currently Principal Trombone of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. A native of Tokyo, Japan, Megumi began to play the trombone at age ten and continued her study at the prestigious Toho High School of Music., where she studied with Sumio Miwa, trombonist in the NHK Symphony. At age 15, she became the youngest player ever to be named as one of the top ten trombonists at the Japanese Wind and Percussion Competition. Two years later she won the Grand Prize in the National Competition for Solo Trombone and won best soloist prize upon graduation from the Toho High School of Music.

Ms. Kanda came to the United States in 1994. She received her Bachelor of Music degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where she studied with James DeSano, who was then principal trombone of the Cleveland Orchestra. Prior to joining the Milwaukee Symphony in 2002, she served as a member of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, a faculty member of the Eastman School of Music Community Education Division and Principal Trombone of the Albany Symphony Orchestra. In April 2006, Ms. Kanda was recognized by the Arion Foundation in Tokyo as one of the most influential Japanese classical artists.

Ms. Kanda has performed in recital and as a soloist across the United States, Europe and Asia, including with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, the US Army Field Band and the Prague Chamber Orchestra. As a JVC/Victor Entertainment artist, Megumi has recorded three solo albums: *Amazing Grace*, *Gloria*, and *Mona Lisa*. She can also be heard on *Magnifique Live*, a live recording of Ms. Kanda and other JVC artists in the August 2005 performance at Takemitsu Hall in Tokyo Opera City.

Megumi Kanda is a Conn/Greenhoe artist/clinician and she is very proud to perform on a custom Greenhoe/Conn trombone. In her spare time, Megumi enjoys gardening, going to Brewers games and taking walks with her husband Dietrich and her sons, Hans and Max.



**Megumi Kanda**

game's over before it even starts."

He outlined his rationale for this process, explaining that musicians dedicate their lives to studying, practicing and mastering their instruments. It seems wrong to him not to give those players pieces that make use of those technical skills.

For Kanda, the next step was waiting for Gordon to start sending bits of the piece to her. But for Gordon, who had never written for the trombone as a solo instrument before, the next step was studying.

**"When I was looking for someone to write this concerto for, I just jumped at the chance to write for the trombone. It's an opportunity to write for an instrument that isn't overwhelmed with solo repertoire," Gordon said.**

He added that the "paucity of solo literature for the trombone," which he also jokingly referred to as "the black hole around the solo repertoire for the trombone," also meant the piece would have a much greater likelihood of future performances than a piece for violin, flute, or any other instrument

with a large solo repertoire, might.

Eager to begin, Gordon said, "I started reading books on trombone technique. Reading a book doesn't mean you can play the instrument, but it means you understand, when you write a line, what you can and can't do." He also began listening to recordings of great trombonists—a lot of recordings.

A firm believer in "exploiting everything an instrument can do," Gordon said, "One thing I always do is to literally take out a pad of paper and write down everything I think the instrument can do—flutter-tonguing, harmonics, loud and soft dynamics, circular breathing and so on."

"I want to be aware of and think about everything an instrument can do," he continued. "I try to find all those things that can be done and ask the player to do them in a way that works."

In the case of the trombone, the obvious, unique capability of the instrument is that it can produce a true glissando. Although Kanda remembers Gordon talking about using glissandi prominently in the piece, in the end he decided not to go down that road at all.

"Sometimes that list will direct what not to do," Gordon said. "In the end I thought, yeah, the trombone can slide, or glissando, but I don't want to go there."

The result of Gordon's study was a concerto Kanda calls, "The hardest thing I've ever seen, by far."

The piece is full of wide-interval leaps and fast scales and arpeggios. It takes the player to both the high and low extremes of the instrument.

For Kanda, waiting for the first pages of music was an uneasy experience.

"When someone is writing something for you, you have no idea what it is going to be like," she said. "He wrote it on the computer, but it's very idiomatic and lies really well on the trombone."

She says that now, but when she first saw pages of the piece, she wasn't so sure.

"He would write something and I would look at it and say, 'There's no way I can play this.' He would say, 'Just try it for a little while.' So I would try and it would fall in place," she said.

"I'm doing things in this piece I never thought I would be able to do—he really knows what he's doing," she said.

That fact that Gordon had done his homework became clear to Kanda in several spots throughout the piece.

There were, for instance, several runs in the piece, such as the one at measure 259 (see example), that that looked unplayable at

the tempo indicated.

"When I first started working on the piece I just tried playing all the notes in regular positions and I knew I couldn't possibly do that in the tempo," Kanda said.

"Then I thought, can I rip this?" she said. "I tried that and I heard all the notes I had just been practicing. So in the end I did it with a rip plus a gliss." The positions she used, starting on the A-flat were: 3-4-1-3-3-4-5-6-5-2-1.

The fact that the piece spends a lot of time in the high range of the tenor trombone also added to the difficulty of learning and performing it.

Kanda said, "The whole second movement kind of hangs out in the high range." She added that there are three high Fs and countless high Es in the piece.

"The piece sounds incredibly hard, and it is," Kanda said, "But the high notes are really placed wisely. There's always some kind of break before the high notes."

"The high notes look really scary when you first take a look at them, but they're not that bad—it's pretty kind writing considering. Like I said, I started to realize that this guy really knows what he's doing."

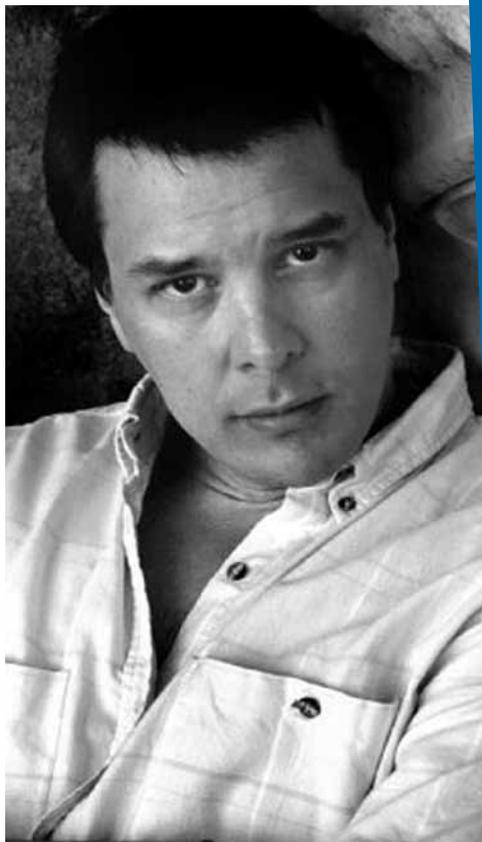
The piece's length also presented an issue, in terms of simple endurance.

"Usually a concerto is 15 to maybe 20 minutes long," Kanda said, "but this one is 25 minutes long. Between that and all the high notes—and the second movement cadenza is really long—I knew that if I could pull it off it would be really spectacular, but my endurance was going to have to be at 100 percent."

To build up her endurance, Kanda began splitting her practice sessions. She would practice a bit in the morning, a bit in the afternoon and a bit in the evening.

"That way I didn't beat myself up, but I got stronger," she said.

Gordon began sending the movements to Kanda as soon as he completed them, the second, the first and then the third, which



Geoffrey Gordon

244  
256  
262  
273  
278 ♩ = ca. 54  
282 *bravissimo* ♩ = ca. 120  
285 ♩ = ca. 144  
288  
291

Trombone Concerto III

**Geoffrey Gordon's** list of works includes orchestral and chamber music—vocal and instrumental—as well as scores for theater, film and dance. His music has been called "brilliant" (Philadelphia Inquirer), "stunning" (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel), "wonderfully idiomatic" (Salt Lake Tribune), "haunting" (Strings Magazine) and "remarkable" (Fanfare). Chicago Tribune music critic John von Rhein called Mr. Gordon's *lux solis aeterna*, premiered in January of this year by the new music ensemble Fulcrum Point, "a cosmic beauty ... of acutely crafted music."

A 2009 winner of the Aaron Copland Award, his work has been funded by the Barlow Endowment, the National Endowment for the Arts, the United Performing Arts Fund, the American Composers Forum, Meet the Composer, the MacArthur Foundation, the American Music Center, the Abelson Foundation, the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust and the Bush Foundation. He has been in residence at the La Napoule Arts Foundation in Cannes, and at the historic Cliff Dweller Club in Chicago. He has been nominated for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Elise Stoeger Prize, which honors achievement in chamber music composition; in 2003, he received the WI State Fellowship in Music Composition. He has received academic fellowship support from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Boston University, New York University and the Guildhall in London.

Mr. Gordon has also served as an ASCAP representative in Washington, lobbying Congress on behalf of copyright protection and composers' rights. His work has been published by Wolfhead Music, Peacock Press and the Oregon Literary Review. His work has been recorded on the Centaur label.

proved to be a gift, of sorts.

"Luckily the whole piece didn't come to me at once," she said. "I think I would have freaked out at not being able to play the whole thing at once."

As the performance dates got closer, Kanda began doing practice runs in a big concert hall. I served as her audience and provided feedback. She also played the piece for the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee trombone studio and talked to my students about the process of learning it.

"I wanted to do practice runs in a big room for confidence," Kanda said. "Once you've played for people and played in a bigger room, you know you can do it—you can fill up this big hall with sound."

She realized from the practice runs that she had to make her sound lighter and more focused to make sure it carried over the sound of a full orchestra and to keep her from getting too tired as she played the piece.

Her process for the practice runs was more than just taking a quick pass through the piece. She spent a little time backstage and warmed up as she would before the performance. The she walked out as though the orchestra was behind her and bowed.

"I wanted to imagine what it would feel like at the performance so that when the time came, it would be a familiar routine," she said. "I tried to make the practice runs as real as possible."

Learning a concerto never means simply learning the solo part. A soloist needs to know what's going on in the orchestra behind them so they know what they will be listening for in terms of pitch, who they will be playing with in any given section and for entrance cues.

III. 15

♩ = ca. 116

Solo Tbn.

mf — molto — ff

8

molto ff — mf — mf

15

ff — sf — molto — ff

19

molto ff

25

mf — mf — molto — ff

32

molto ff

37

mf — ff — mf

Usually, soloists can study the score, listen to recordings and/or work with a pianist who plays a reduction of the orchestral score to prepare. But when the orchestral score hasn't been completed, there are obviously no recordings or reductions to be had. Gordon provided Kanda with a midi file for rehearsal purposes.

"That little file was a pretty decent quality," she said. "If I hadn't had that file I would have been in serious trouble." The first movement is kind of atmospheric, so it's kind of hard to know where to come in and parts of it are hard to count, even with the midi file."

**She said that the challenge was to make music and keep tempo with the midi file, which was as strict as a metronome, without getting so accustomed to playing it that strictly that you feel you have to play it that way in performance. She laughed and added, "I'm not a machine!"**

Kanda got two rehearsals with the orchestra, one the day of the first performance.

"I told the conductor [MSO guest conductor James Gaffigan] that I wanted to do the work at the first rehearsal and take it easy at the second rehearsal and he was cool with that," she said. "My motto that day was that I would rather sound better at the concert than at the rehearsal."

To that end, she did what singers call "marking" at the rehearsal, taking everything very easy, playing the piece very softly and taking high spots down an octave.

"That Friday with the rehearsal and the concert, was the hardest day," Kanda said. "Saturday was much easier—playing that concerto once in a day was tough enough."

The Consul General of Japan at Chicago, George Hisaeda (who happens to be a trombonist himself), attended the concert and was announced in the hall before the performance.

"I thought it was really cool that the Consul General was there and was announced," Kanda said. "I've never seen a concert where a diplomat was announced—it really cheered me up to hear that from backstage. It made me think that this really was an event."

Clips of Kanda's performance of the Gordon Concerto are posted on [www.reverbnation.com/geoffreygordoncomposer](http://www.reverbnation.com/geoffreygordoncomposer) and <http://soundcloud.com/geoffrey-gordon-composer>. Gordon's web site, [www.geoffreygordoncomposer.com](http://www.geoffreygordoncomposer.com) is undergoing a redesign at present, but should be back up soon. Clips of the performance will also be available soon on the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra website, at: [http://www.mso.org/mso\\_connected/gordon](http://www.mso.org/mso_connected/gordon).

Anyone in North America who is interested in performing the concerto can request a perusal score from Gordon's management: LCM Artists Management, [lcartistsmgmt@att.net](mailto:lcartistsmgmt@att.net).

The contact in Europe is: Xenia Evangelista Communications (Munich), [x.e@xeniaevangelista.com](mailto:x.e@xeniaevangelista.com).

*Bass-trombonist Mark Hoelscher is the Adjunct Professor of Trombone at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. He is a member of the Chicago-based Millar Brass Ensemble and is an Edwards artist/clinician.*

ON THE WEB

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