

MELBOURNE
International Arts
FESTIVAL

03

October
2018

21



ALVA NOTO AND RYUICHI SAKAMOTO

FRI 19 OCTOBER

Arts Centre Melbourne, Hamer Hall

1 hr 30 mins, no interval

PRESENTED
WITH

ASIA TOPA





ALVA NOTO
aka Carsten Nicolai
Electronics

RYUICHI SAKAMOTO
Piano & electronics

TWO

Bobby Barry looks at how Ryuichi Sakamoto and Alva Noto came to become regular collaborators and how their working relationship has developed.

“All great architecture,” Philip Johnson once wrote, “is the design of space that contains, cuddles, exalts or stimulates the persons in that space.” Much the same could be said of the sonic structures built live by Alva Noto (aka Carsten Nicolai) and Ryuichi Sakamoto. Theirs is a music that does not merely inhabit the space of its performance but transforms it—transforming in turn the way it feels to inhabit that space for the people in it, alternately cuddling them, exalting them, stimulating them.

It was at Philip Johnson’s iconic Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, that Sakamoto and Nicolai performed together in 2016. Built in 1949 and used as a home by the architect until their death in 2005, the International Style residence was a pioneering example of the use of industrial materials like steel and glass in a domestic setting, its clear sides making the surrounding environment into what Johnson referred to as “very expensive wallpaper”—a bucolic, yet highly manicured landscape modelled on Poussin’s *The Funeral of Phocion*.

Invited to perform there for the opening of an exhibition by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, by the House’s Curator and Collections Manager Irene Shum, Sakamoto was determined to “use the house itself as a musical instrument.” To that effect, they attached contact microphones to the glass walls of the building, dragging rubber headed mallets across their surface to produce sounds that for Shum evoked “contemplation and longing”. These were then augmented by the pair with keyboards, mixers, crotales, and singing bowls in a 45 minute-long improvisation full of mystery and strange atmospheres.

Of the occasion, Shum recalls, “A sudden rain storm forced the evening’s guests into The Glass House at the start. During the performance, the storm cleared into a dramatic red and pink sunset and concluded in nightfall.” The record of that magical evening, the result of only one short day of rehearsal but the culmination of a working relationship between the two musicians stretching back almost two decades, would become the pair’s 2018 album, *Glass*, and will likewise form the basis for their improvised performance this evening.

At the time of their first meeting, Ryuichi Sakamoto was already a star. As a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra (with Haruomi



Hosono and Yukihiro Takahashi), Sakamoto revolutionised electronic music, synthesising the electropop of Kraftwerk with Italo disco, arcade game sounds, and exotica. As a solo artist—1980's path-breaking *Riot in Lagos* in particular—Sakamoto practically conjured new genres out of thin air. As a film composer, Sakamoto won a BAFTA for *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* in 1983 and an Oscar for *The Last Emperor* in 1987. But Sakamoto, as Nicolai would tell *The Quietus'* Dale Berning in a 2011 interview, had always been “naturally a very curious person, always looking for new things”.

Thirteen years Sakamoto's junior, Nicolai was on tour in Japan for the first time in 1999. Under the alias Alva Noto released a trio of brilliant albums and several more singles and EPs, characterised by a minimal, hard edge, as cool and crystalline in their way as Philip Johnson's buildings. Attending Nicolai's concert in Tokyo, Sakamoto immediately recognised an extraordinary talent. “I immediately thought ‘Something really great could come from collaborating with this guy,’” Sakamoto told Berning. A year later, the Japanese magazine *Code Unfinished* commissioned Nicolai to remix music by Sakamoto and, impressed by the results, Sakamoto soon started sending Nicolai more and more material to work on, ultimately resulting in their 2002 CD, *Vrioon*.

Vrioon would prove to be just the beginning of a long working relationship between the two artists that would produce a brace of further albums. Talking to *The Vinyl Factory's* Amar Ediriwira shortly after the release of that film, Sakamoto said that before Iñárritu brought them back together, the duo had thought their collaboration finished, “exhausted”. But the process of working on *The Revenant's* soundtrack made them both realise they had more to say together. “I think we complement each other the way a painter will use many materials in a painting for different textures and expressions that can't be realized by only one,” Sakamoto explained. “Disparate elements create something unique, more than the sum of the parts.” With *Glass*, perhaps their most subtle and expressive work to date, Sakamoto and Nicolai prove there remains a great deal of life in their working relationship. Like the Glass House itself, their music has become a kind of soft machine capable of reflecting and transforming its environment. Inhabit it, and feel exalted (or cuddled).

—BOBBY BARRY

Bobby Barry is a freelance writer based in London.

BIOGRAPHIES

ALVA NOTO AKA CARSTEN NICOLAI

Carsten Nicolai is a German artist and musician based in Berlin. Born 1965 Nicolai is part of an artist generation who work intensively in the transitional area between music, art and science. With a strong adherence to reductionism Nicolai's sound experiments into the field of electronic music creating code of signs, acoustics and visual symbols.

Diverse musical projects include remarkable collaborations with Ryuichi Sakamoto, Ryoji Ikeda (cyclo), Blixa Bargeld and Mika Vainio. Nicolai scored the music for Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant*. The score was nominated for a Golden Globe, BAFTA, Grammy and Critics Choice Award.

Nicolai seeks to overcome the separation of the sensory perceptions of humans by making scientific phenomena like sound and light frequencies perceivable for both eyes and ears.

RYUICHI SAKAMOTO

Though born in Tokyo, Ryuichi Sakamoto has been a true citizen of the world, writing music inspired by the traditions of Okinawa, Indonesia and Brazil and has collaborated with David Bowie, David Sylvian, dramatist Robert Wilson, author William S Burroughs, the Three Tenors' Jose Carreras and His Holiness The Dalai Lama, among many others. Sakamoto has written music for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona and for the 400th anniversary of the city of Mannheim, Germany.

As a composer, performer, producer, and environmentalist, few artists have as diverse a resume as that of Sakamoto including pioneering electronic music as a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra, classical pieces, minimal/ambient music, many art collaborations and over 30 film scores.

Recent works include a collaborative score with Alva Noto for Alejandro González Iñárritu's Academy Award-winning film *The Revenant* and the release of Sakamoto's 14th solo album, *async*.

ASIA TOPA

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asiatopa.com.au

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