

道 *michi*—Keiko Abe's Path

BY REBECCA KITE

By 1970, Keiko Abe had established herself as the leading marimba soloist in Japan. For the next three decades, she worked tirelessly to foster public awareness of her instrument's broader capabilities—by performing, commissioning, and composing serious marimba music. Abe, in a sense, created an audience “appetite” for the concert marimba, and then fed that appetite with her performances and new music, whether commissioned or composed by herself.

These decades also saw a related progression in the pioneering core of Abe's professional life: She exported the marimba's concert role to the rest of the world by giving performances in the United States and Europe. This was not a simple thing to do, nor was it a completely foregone conclusion that she would succeed. In fact, one major concert during the initial part of her international period was plagued by unforeseen setbacks that had nothing to do with music at all.

In 1981, Abe was asked to perform at Carnegie Hall in New York City as a concerto soloist in a concert titled “Music from Japan.” The concert featured the American premiere of four pieces by Japanese composers. It would be conducted by Sergui Comissiona and performed by the American Symphony Orchestra. And Abe would perform the marimba solo part in the Akira Ifukube work “Lauda Concertata for Orchestra and Marimba.” But she had to fly to New York for a week of rehearsals prior to the Friday night performance.

The difficulty began with her travel plans. During Abe's American tours in previous years, she was accompanied by a language interpreter who made all the hotel reservations and obtained the necessary passport visa. But this time, despite Abe's limited fluency in English, she would travel without an interpreter, and her manager would take care of the visa. Unfortunately, her manager's English was little better than her own, and he applied for a visa that would allow Abe to visit the United States, but not to work

out of line for questioning in another room. Because she could not understand more complex questions in English, an interpreter was called in to translate the agents' questions and her responses. Through this interpreter, Abe explained that she had no intention of remaining in the United States to work. She was only performing in New York and returning to Japan. She also had no idea that her visa would present problems.

Nearly four hours later, the INS agents decided Abe was telling the truth—that

she simply did not realize her visa was the wrong type. She could enter the United States, they said, but she must have her tourist visa changed to a work visa in New York, before performing. This she was happy to do.

Meanwhile, due to the long delay in immigration, Abe had missed her connecting flight from Seattle to New York. Taking a much later plane, she arrived at 4:00 in the morning, exhausted and alone. With difficulty, she took a taxi from the airport to her hotel and registered at the desk. But as she turned to find the el-



Sergui Comissiona and Keiko Abe with the American Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall.

evator up to her room on the fourteenth floor, she saw a group of men standing around in the lobby. They looked her over and said things she didn't understand, but their threatening intentions were clear. Abe tried to ignore them.

“Musician,” she answered.
“And where do you perform?”
“Carnegie Hall,” Abe replied.

This answer told the agent that this particular foreign visitor was going to work in the United States, and therefore needed a different visa. Abe was pulled

She entered the elevator, and one of the men walked into the car with her. Ascending floor by floor, Abe felt this man looking at her. She remembered what her father had said about dealing with Americans—how it wouldn't do to bow politely. Instead, she must look them in the eye.

By now, the atmosphere in the elevator was thick with tension and Abe felt very afraid. She decided to use the strong energy that comes to her during a performance. Deliberately, she looked into the man's eyes with her performer's intense focus and concentration. "Back off. Don't bother me," her eyes said. The stranger got the message. When Abe left the elevator, he stayed behind. She found her room and quickly locked the door behind her.

Though safe at last, she was unable to sleep that night. The next morning, she phoned the artistic director and founder of the Music from Japan organization, Naoyuki Miura, to find out if he could help her with the visa. Since Miura had been called by the INS in Seattle, he already knew about her difficulties. He told Abe that he would be willing to cancel her concerto appearance if she wasn't able to perform in the United States legally.

Abe had not cried during the INS interrogation, nor even when she was harassed in the lobby and followed by a

man into the elevator, but the thought of losing everything she'd worked for was the last straw. She felt tears stinging her eyes. Still, she asked Miura not to change the program. She would try to get the correct visa.

That same morning, she found her way to the Japanese Embassy and waited at the gate until it opened. Meeting with the embassy person who handled visas, she was told that she had two choices. She could perform without the right visa. But afterwards she would be blacklisted and could never enter the United States again. Or, she could go to the American Immigration Office and attempt to transform her tourist visa into a work visa. But this would be extremely difficult; in fact, it probably wouldn't be possible at all.

Abe decided to get the proper visa—and as soon as she made that decision, she *knew* she would succeed. Going ahead with the orchestra rehearsals, she planned to visit the INS Office later on and take care of her visa. But on her first attempt, after waiting in line for a long

time, an INS agent told her, "No. Impossible." Undeterred, she returned a second day. Again, she waited, and again she got the same response.

On the third day, things were different. Instead of the usual quiet, tired strangers standing in long lines, the whole waiting room was filled with groups of Vietnamese refugees. These were "boat people" who had fled their country in tiny boats. Many were crying, and all were sad and scared.

Hours passed. Abe felt very moved by the refugees; they had lived through a war as she had, when she was a child, though they had actually been forced to escape their native country simply to survive. By comparison, her visa problem seemed insignificant. Abe began to question everything about her career. *Why do I play the marimba?* she asked herself. *Why do I play for other people? Why do I need music?*

Recalling this profound experience years later, she said, "Before this moment, my idea had been to establish myself as a soloist. And I had such a happy, lucky time! I was working with composers and other performers. I was successful. I was young, and I wanted to create a reputation, to play with great orchestras, to become famous. But, that day, waiting to get my visa, waiting with the Vietnamese refugees, I realized I had been wrong.

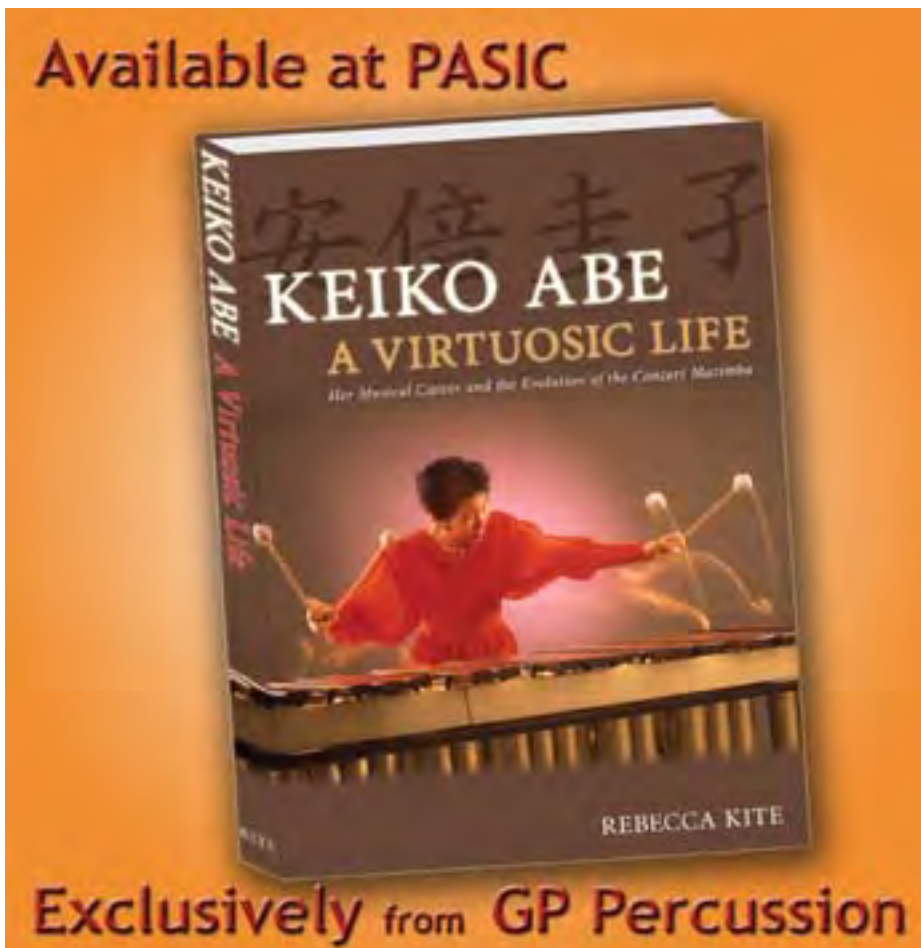
"Suddenly, in that waiting room, I didn't care about my concert at Carnegie Hall, anymore. If I could not get the visa, that was okay. I realized that I play music because I need to—for myself. And I didn't care, then, about the music business, about music critics. I realized that I must be true to my real personality and character. I wanted to be more naturally myself. It was enough to simply play the marimba for my own enjoyment.

"I realized that I have a feeling of very strong energy when I play the marimba. I need that power and that energy when I play music. But when I finish the performance, that strong energy is gone. I am just a normal person, then."

As Abe continued to wait in the INS Office that day, she began writing a poem to express her feelings. Later on, she would title her poem *Traveler*.¹

I am a traveler, just a traveler,
Rather unremarkable.

On the mountain path,



Trees overhang the narrow places,
Their branches sweeping down to cover
my body.

If the May wind pauses in such a place
To caress me, and cool the sweat on my
cheek,
It is enough.

Or down by the sea,
White waves dancing like birds,
Rising in a storm.
The smell of the shore
Calls my consciousness awake.
If, in such a place,
There is a harbor promising sleep,
It is enough.

The suffering,
Passed through like a tunnel.
Morning sun dappling through the
trees,
Radiant, awesome, pure.
If, on such a morning,
A cloudless morning shines also in your
eyes,
It is enough.

If, at the parting of ways,
I can laugh,
And say that you, too,
Have made a journey.
It is enough, and more.

A traveler, just a traveler,
Rather unremarkable.

When Abe realized that she no longer
cared whether she appeared at Carnegie
Hall or not, she felt herself letting go of
her lifelong career ambitions: She no
longer felt that her performance career
was her core identity, who she really was.

And then, a sort of miracle occurred.
On Abe's fourth and final trip to the INS
Office, Mr. Miura accompanied her to act
as interpreter. But he wasn't needed. It
was as if there had never been any diffi-
culty at all. Abe was called forward by an
agent to get her passport stamped, and
suddenly, she had permission to work in
the United States.

That evening, on January 16, 1981,
she performed the American premiere of
Ifukube's "Lauda Concertata for Ma-
rimba and Orchestra at Carnegie Hall."
The next day, she flew home to Japan.

Abe's spontaneous "self-realization"
(knowing in a profound way who she
truly was, apart from her professional
identity and success) had a far-reaching

effect. When she understood, in the INS
waiting room, that she was someone
whose way of engaging and interacting
with the world was through music and
the marimba—someone for whom that
self-expression was actually *enough*—she
felt, in a sense, reconnected with her
roots in Japanese culture.

And so, while the early decades of her
life had been focused on working ex-
tremely hard to build her musical career,
from that point forward she placed less of
her attention on the energetic, outward
"doing" aspects of her professional life,
and more on those aspects of her life in
music that contained the more rooted
quality of "being" and the fuller expres-
sion of her real artistry.

Similarly, while Abe's performance ca-
reer in childhood, young adulthood and,
to some degree, later on, had almost
completely revolved around performing
Western xylophone and marimba tran-
scriptions, she now largely concerned
herself with the musical sensibility of the
East.

The energy of a piece of music or art is
thought to already exist, in the East; it is
present in the very air—part of the uni-
versal energy of life. The artist is one
who uses her creativity to give voice to
what is already present, so that others
may hear or see the energy that is there.
The individual artist is simply a conduit
for art or music.

"When I compose, the best music
comes when I feel alone, solitary," Abe
has said. "It is not physical solitude, but
mental solitude. If I go out into nature
and listen, the ground and the trees give
me energy.

"And then I realize that my everyday
feelings and desires are actually very in-

significant. I am just a small part of na-
ture, a small part of the universe. My de-
sires evaporate. I feel healed and calm.
Then, I can see clearly and concentrate
on the music."

ENDNOTE

1. Translated by David Crandall.

*This article is an excerpt from the
forthcoming book Keiko Abe: A Virtuosoic
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tion of the Concert Marimba, published
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SHOWCASE CONCERTS Thursday

PLANO EAST SENIOR
HIGH SCHOOL
9:00 a.m.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
10:00 a.m.

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2:00 p.m.

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