

**HIROAKI ZAKOJI**  
An appreciation by [James Stevens](#)

Zakoji Hiroaki ... I met him only once, but the vibes were irresistible. Here was a young man full of good humour, humanity, love and compassion as well as a superb talent. This was at the finals of the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai International Award competition in June 1986. Admittedly, we had the advantage of hearing each other's music before we met so that gave us an extra insight. His work was the magnificent "Continuum" Op.18, a work which should have won the award but, like all these affairs, it was not simply quality that counted. Politics also entered into it and I had to share the award with a young composer who was the pupil of one of the judges. While they were debating their decision a Shakuhachi player gave a long and wonderful recital, half an hour in fact. The interpreter on the panel told me afterwards that this was unusual. Normally it would have been just a few minutes but in this case it was due to the problem the judges had in making their decision. Anyway, Hiroaki and I became lifelong friends. Tragically his life was to be cut very short a few months later. This was not only a loss to the musical world but to society in general. However, a frequent, lively and heart-warming correspondence ensued leaving me all the more anxious to get back to Japan to meet him again.

And then one day a letter arrived bearing his wife's name on the envelope... I knew immediately what was in it before I opened it. I wept for three days afterwards. I simply could not believe he had gone and I could not bear to accept it. He was always so full of life – not only his music but his way of living in general. He was full of beans but he had obviously overstretched himself having to do a day-job to keep body and soul together and composing into the small hours, when he should have been making a living out of his creative work. There are very few composers who have the overall comprehension of their art/craft like Hiroaki. Within a short while I had written my tribute to this delightful and talented young man which I called "D" – Zakoji ni Sasageru. The D was a reference to his affinity with the note, if not the scale, of D although he was neither essentially a tonal nor an atonal composer.

Hiroaki not only had this wonderful technical accomplishment, but he also had wit. For example the work in his suite for piano, "Piano Piece III", dedicated to Mozart. It has all the Mozartian qualities but is essentially Zakoji. He was a brilliant pianist and I have a tape of him playing this work. Another work of his which takes a backward glance at Samuel Barber, is a beguiling and enchanting piece. I leave the reader to establish the work to which I am referring.

He not only composed music but also wrote on his specialised subject, for instance a comprehensive work on traditional Japanese Instruments, which, in fact, prompted me to write "Nippon no Ame" for a friend of mine who was chief priest at a temple in Tokyo and ran an amateur music group. I tried,

unsuccessfully I am sorry to say, to get Hiroaki's treatise published over here because it is unique, but there again, politics vetoed the project.

Hiroaki's work is the equal of any other Japanese composer, however well-known, and more versatile than most. Finally may I quote from my obituary, "His work was unique because, despite its essentially contemporary style it owed nothing to any particular fad or fashion and thus was outside the mainstream of contemporary composers. His material was the product of an exquisite inner ear and it was treated with Mozartian integrity. It also embodied traditional Japanese concepts; hence he was able to compose with equal readiness for chamber group, synths, symphony orchestra or traditional instruments."

([James Stevens](#), 4 January 2007)