

# EMBRACING MUSIC AS AN INDISPENSABLE TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

*HIROTSURU Sumire is not only an accomplished violinist, but also a next-generation leader addressing social issues through music. Here, she reflects on the qualities necessary for musicians in the new era, as well as how she has been leveraging her music through what she learned at Harvard College.*

There is a saying that goes, “If you chase two rabbits, you will catch neither.” Yet, violinist HIROTSURU Sumire has proved herself to be the exception to the rule by pursuing varying goals with great success. Graduating with honors from both Harvard College and The Juilliard School—a private performing arts conservatory in New York—now, at the age of 29, she is fully demonstrating her talents as a musician, while also wearing the hats of educator and entrepreneur, among others. “As a child, I hated to lose. When it came to studying, I felt wholly compelled to achieve perfect scores, and if I was in a music competition, I just had to win first prize. It’s that simple,” she laughs. But underlying her broad range of activities is a distinctive sense of identity and perception of music.

“I want to become a violinist who not only pursues new heights in music, but also uses music as a tool to find solutions to social challenges and takes on initiatives that will benefit others.”

Hirotsuru’s values were largely influenced by world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who is also a Harvard graduate. She first performed with him and his multicultural musical ensemble Silkroad Ensemble during her time at Harvard College. “While one of the world’s top musicians, he has contributed to a wide range of causes. These include his involvement in the making of a film—featuring musicians of Silkroad Ensemble from diverse backgrounds and his performance at a refugee camp—and educational projects. He has not stopped at merely giving

Besides her socially oriented work, violinist HIROTSURU Sumire has been taking on new challenges in music as well, such as improvising music for YouTube distribution and performing game music. One of her future goals is to find ways to break away from the conventional form of classical concerts, such as incorporating audience interaction within performances. TETSUO OHARA



Left: A backstage shot with world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma (center) in 2015. Ma addresses social challenges through music, and her encounter with him changed the way Hirotsuru (far right) perceives music. Right: Hirotsuru graduated from Harvard College in 2016. At first, she didn’t seriously consider attending the world-class university. However, at age 16, while on tour in the U.S. including a performance at Carnegie Hall—as a reward for winning the grand prize at an international competition—she had the chance to visit the university, and sensed something in common with the Harvard students, namely, their passion for both their studies and such extracurricular activities as theater and sports.



performances, but also has a great mission going beyond that, and this has left a very large impression on me,” Hirotsuru recalls.

Inspired by Ma, she became determined to pursue a professional career in music and entered the master’s program at The Juilliard School to hone her musical sensitivity and skills. After graduating, she steadily built up her career as a musician flying around the world giving performances, while also finding the time to found a music consulting company in New York as the first step in her social endeavors. Using the business perspectives and connections that she had developed at Harvard, she supported musicians who were highly skilled as performers but not quite so adept at promoting themselves. According to Hirotsuru, one of the key elements of success for today’s musicians is the power of words. “It’s not enough to just provide good music, because people are exposed daily to vast amounts of information, and their attention spans are short. Musicians need the ability to put a story behind the music and their own thoughts and feelings into words, and convey that to others.”

Since transferring her base of activities to Japan, Hirotsuru has been investing energy into education. In addition to serving as a member of the Council for the Creation of Future Education, established by the government of Japan, and as a university lecturer, she has been operating a summer school program, “Summer in JAPAN,” in her hometown of Oita on the island of Kyushu, since 2012. For the program, foreign college students—mainly from Harvard—are invited to teach elementary, middle, and high school students a wide range of subjects, including essay writing, computer science and critical thinking. The student teachers also perform in concerts together with Hirotsuru. Behind the program is the hope

that direct contact with students from prestigious universities will encourage children to become interested in studying abroad, no matter their background, and to balance an energetic pursuit of both their studies and non-academic activities.

Hirotsuru believes that such initiatives have a positive impact on her own music as well. “At Juilliard, I was very impressed by the fact that many of the more accomplished musicians, in addition to music, valued activities outside of the field. I felt that in order to stride forward musically, it was crucial not only to hone our musical skills but also to learn through various experiences.”

One incredible musician achieving this goal is Yo-Yo Ma. Although he will always be an aspiring role model for her, Hirotsuru says that she does not want to simply copy him. “Since the situation and norms of the world are always changing, you will fall behind the times by just imitating someone else. That is why I want to carry the torch of people such as Yo-Yo Ma, passing along the core of his and others’ work, while carving my own path.”



“Summer in JAPAN,” organized by Hirotsuru, provides children with the opportunity to directly engage with college students from overseas—mainly from Harvard—through a two-week program.