

遠野アメリカンミュージックフェスティバル  
**Coming Together** at the  
 TONO AMERICAN MUSIC FESTIVAL

By Georgia Stitt, '94

**A year ago**, I was asked by a friend and colleague to travel to Japan as piano accompanist for her choir. It was a great opportunity; I'd never been to Japan, and now I had a chance to travel with my friend and write the whole thing off as a business expense. Plus, I'd get to look up Kevin Simmonds, a dear friend who'd graduated with me in 1994. He was a singer. I was a pianist and composer, and during our years at Vanderbilt, I had been his accompanist.

Kevin came to one of our concerts in Tokyo, having traveled nearly eight hours by bus from his small town of Tono, where he works as a teacher of English and music. The reunion was sweet, and before long we were fantasizing about my coming back to Japan to visit his students and make music with him on his own turf. Ah, if only we were rich. And plagued with free time. And rich.

A few weeks after I returned home to New York, Kevin sent me an e-mail with a link to Arts International, a foundation that funds American artists traveling abroad to participate in arts festivals. Kevin proposed that I apply for a grant to participate in the First Annual Tono International Arts Association's American Music Festival, which he was creating. He was serious. He had begun the paperwork, started the Web site, and was gathering support in his small village (one of eight that make up the city of Tono) for the largest arts festival the region had ever seen. His proposal covered five

weekends of performances, each featuring a different American artist who was a specialist in a specific type of American music. Kevin asked me to open the festival and to represent American musical theater.



Kevin Simmonds, '94, Jason Robert Brown, and Georgia Stitt, '94. Photo by Aomi Hyodo/Theater Guide [Japan]

Now, I have played on Broadway, I've written songs that have had a life in the cabaret world, and I'm currently writing a musical that is on target for production sometime next year. But to represent musical theater, all by myself, to a rural culture that had little to no exposure to it? I needed help. I invited a friend to join me, Jason Robert Brown, a young composer who wrote the Off-Broadway musical *Songs For A New World*. Jason also wrote music and lyrics for the Broadway musical *Parade* with book writer Alfred Uhry (*Driving Miss Daisy*). *Parade* was directed by the legendary Hal Prince (*Phantom Of The Opera*), and it won

Jason the 1999 Tony Award for best score. Not that I'm name-dropping.

With about a week until the deadline, I wrote a grant application. I burned CDs. I created a budget. I e-mailed Kevin almost every day. And I got the grant, which was plenty of money for us to make the trip and take two singers with us.

By the end of summer, Jason and I had hired Broadway veterans Sally Wilfert and Keith Byron Kirk and began the daunting task of putting together a two-hour concert of our original music. We included our best solos, duets, and quartets. We took turns singing and playing for each other. We were having a blast: putting a concert together with friends, practicing conversational Japanese phrases, buying little gifts for our hosts.

#### **And then September 11th happened.**

How many articles these days have that exact sentence? The whole world was shocked, devastated, and changed by the events of that horrifying day. But we were New Yorkers, and the distance from our homes to the World Trade Center had been measured in blocks, not miles. The concert in Japan was scheduled for October 5th and 6th, less than a month after the terrorist attacks. The thought of flying on an airplane for 14 hours was the least appealing thing I could imagine.

Kevin called to ask if we were coming. The people of Tono were eager to meet us. The money was in place. The travel arrangements were secured. We decided to proceed as planned.

I have never been on a plane so empty. I had an entire row to myself and was able to stretch out and sleep for much of the trip. Once in Tokyo, we took a subway from the airport into town, then a bullet train (traveling at a speed of nearly 200 miles per hour) north into the mountainous Iwate Prefecture. We took a small

commuter train the final hour of our journey. We were the only Western faces on board.

We arrived at 11:00 pm having been in transit for about 24 hours. We were greeted by a small group of Japanese women (all named Keiko) who were waving American flags and stumbling over each other to meet us. It was exhausting, humbling, and beautiful. Two days of preparation for the concert went by quickly. We were dined and feted and gifted. We traveled to several schools in the region and performed for the students, who greeted us in studied English and presented their own performances: a traditional deer dance, a poem, a rendition of "Oh Happy Day."

We performed our concert to a full house of non-English-speaking patrons, who had come from as far away as Tokyo. We performed the songs in English, though each was preceded with a short description in Japanese about the meaning of the song or its placement in a specific show. Musical theater is a particularly lyric-driven art form, and we were concerned about our ability to communicate without translating lyrics. We needn't have worried. Judging from the standing ovation we received, it seems we communicated just fine.

Everywhere we went, the Japanese people wanted to ask us about "the terror." They wanted to touch us, to feel that we were okay. We had anticipated being ambassadors of music; we wound up being ambassadors of New York and America. We spoke lovingly of our hometown and how it had been changed, physically, emotionally, spiritually. The Japanese people nodded in agreement, and it was clear we had much more in common with them than our love of music.



*Stephen Seifert, former Blair faculty member, also played at Tono. Here he signs the Tono American Music Festival quilt stitched by audience members in tribute to the victims of the September 11th attacks.*

Proceeds from the Tono American Music Festival were donated to the Twin Towers Fund in New York City. To learn more about the festival and its artists, please visit [www.tonoarts.org](http://www.tonoarts.org).