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Junko Oba - Interview with Mark Slobin

Junko Oba

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Mark Slobin: Hi, Junko, are you there?

Junko Oba: Yeah.

MS: You're almost online. There you are.

JO: Can you see me? Yes! Ok. [laughs]

MS: All right. Good to see you!

JO: Good to see you too!

MS: Right, it was nice to—Austin was fun, huh.

JO: Yeah, I had a wonderful conference, and then somebody from University of Hawaii was there to listen to the paper, and she was interested in making it into a book.

MS: Oh, great.

JO: That was very very exciting.

MS: That is, really, it's about time. Yes.

JO: Yes.

MS: Yes, you need to do the book! Right.

JO: Right.

MS: Well let me know how that goes. So would you expand what you had already, or how would you make it into a book?

JO: Um, I would like to make it into a monograph and I have to discuss it, if, and it was not clear to me if she wanted to make a panel, which treated the same topic with three different angles, and then sort of, you know, if she was thinking the combination or focusing on like, spatial temporal identity performers of the Nikkei Brazilians, so, I'd like to go with the latter.

MS: Well, you'll just see, keep me posted.

JO: Yes I will, definitely.

MS: So meanwhile, I'm just you know, talking to people from all over the world about their experience at Wesleyan.

JO: Yes!

MS: It's very nice, you know, China, South Africa, England, all these people.

JO: I know.

MS: From different generations, you know. So it's very pleasant work. And so yeah, let's talk a little. I mean, how did you, so let's see, Junko Oba, December 2015, and what were your years at Wesleyan?

JO: I came here as a GLSP student in 1990, and then entered the music program in 1993, and then stayed there forever, as you know, and then ended in 2012.

MS: So when were you in residence? From '93 to?

JO: To 2002.

MS: But you weren't living in Middletown all that time?

JO: Mmhmm.

MS: You were?!

JO: Yes.

MS: Wow. Yeah.

JO: Yeah, so 2002, I moved to Tennessee.

MS: Right, oh that's right. Ok.

JO: Mmhm. Yeah.

MS: So how did you hear about Wesleyan? Why did you go there?

JO: Well, Wesleyan was, I think the university has, especially the ethnomusicology program, has a long connection through Koizumi and Tsuge.

MS: Uh huh.

JO: And then Tsuge was one of the professors I took a music course at my alma mater in Japan.

MS: Oh, ok.

JO: But at that time I was not considering ethnomusicology as my scholarly focus. And then I followed my ex-spouse who wanted to study French literature at Yale, and I explored Yale music program, um, department, because, you know, one of few colleges very famous outside the United States. So, ok, I lived in New Haven, and then Yale was very famous, and then, so I met and studied with Allen Forte.

MS: Oh, ok.

JO: Music theory, yeah, because I was interested in, originally, the contemporary music theory.

MS: Uh huh.

JO: So, but, as we progressed with those studies, it became clearer that he didn't want to, didn't want me to include any extramusical elements.

MS: Of course.

JO: [laughs]

MS: I took a class with him, once, too!

JO: So he, at one meeting, joked, "Well, people like you probably should go to Wesleyan and study with people like Alvin Lucier." So I came to visit Wesleyan, met with Alvin, but at that time, I was still new and then my ex-husband was commuting to New York City so it was not very practical to start like full time student, so I took courses in GLSP with Dennis Waring, Jim Cowdery, and Matthew Allen.

MS: Oh, really. Interesting.

JO: Yeah, so that's my sort of, you know, introduction.

MS: Yeah.

JO: Yes.

MS: Yeah, I don't remember any of that in detail, right, right.

JO: Yeah. So finally, Matthew connected me to Viswa. As part of my project, I interviewed Viswa. I still have a tape, that's my first ethnomusicological interview!

MS: Huh. How interesting. So what was the topic?

JO: It was the transmission. So how he learned and then what matters in the process of transmission. And at that point I was very, very curious about the topic. But I don't know why I dropped that topic. And then I became interested in, like, occupation period, US occupation period of radio broadcast. So, with that topic, I applied for the music program.

MS: Ok. Yeah, I remember that. Yeah. Hmm. And you had studied that before you came?

JO: No, actually, my undergraduate major was physics. [both laugh] So, music as a minor. I wrote a thesis about the time theory of John Cage's prepared piano, so completely different. But my hometown in Japan was where the headquarters of the occupational forces was set, so I was interested in the history and the legacy of that time.

MS: Yeah.

JO: As it appears in sort of our everyday life.

MS: Oh, I see, I see. Yeah, well that's all very—you had such an open mind! You were interested in so many different issues, right.

JO: I, it took me long time to find, I was interested in different things, and then struggled to make connections, and then I didn't get that kind of guidance at my college in Japan. So, Wesleyan allowed me to sort of explore, do different things, work, I worked with Su [Zheng] and I learned historical methodology, and then Gage [Averill] encouraged me to get into more contemporary, more popular music issues as well, and then I finally worked with you. That is going to give me a whole different perspective of diaspora, so, so—great place! [both laugh]

MS: So you learned from everybody. Right.

JO: Yes.

MS: Over a long...

JO: Except from Eric Charry.

MS: Right, well that was late when he came, already.

JO: Yes.

MS: You had been there a long time.

JO: [laughs] Yes.

MS: So, you knew Wesleyan, so there was nothing really surprising about it when you, you know, started the program, you were familiar with everything by then.

JO: I would say so. Because I was taking classes in room 301 actually [laughs] with the GLSP.

MS: Ok.

JO: So, um, it, the transition was probably smoother than some international students.

MS: Oh, for sure, right, yeah.

JO: Yeah.

MS: Yeah. Well, that's interesting. So you continued, did you continue your interest in composition and talk to the composers or the composition students?

JO: Um, I was very close with some composition students. In my class especially we had a lot of composition students. Matt Rogalsky, Roland Dahinden.

MS: Oh yeah.

JO: So I did some improvisation performance. In our year, one of the problems and methods was taught by Alvin, so.

MS: Oh, ok.

JO: And then, so, Peter Hoyt was teaching comparative theory, so.

MS: Right, yeah.

JO: It was an ideal sort of mix for me, coming from a music theory background.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh. Oh right, so you, yeah, you had the theory and—yeah.

JO: Yeah.

MS: And you were able to integrate it. And there seemed to be a good atmosphere among the students from the different backgrounds. It comes and goes in different periods, you know.

JO: That's true, yes. I think, in my Ph.D. years, it's leaning more toward, you know, Latin Caribbean, jazz students, but my master's years, I had a lot of composition students in the cohort.

MS: Huh, uh huh.

JO: Yeah.

MS: So, you were one of the earlier East Asia topic people, because Su wasn't there that long when you came.

JO: I, Donna Kwon and I were Su's first students.

MS: That's what I was thinking, so that was, yes.

JO: Yep, yep.

MS: What was that like?

JO: It's a great timing. She was there and, well I think there was some difficulty, because Su was such a big model, and when you know I was not very confident, there were a lot of times when things were not working well, I constantly compared myself with Su, and rather than getting encouragement [laughs] it's like, "Oh my god, why I can't do what Su could do?" So it's an interesting background, yeah.

MS: Well, yeah, that was the beginning, we've had so many people, particularly women, from East Asia since then. It's become one of our major resource areas for students.

JO: Yeah, that's true. We had Xiaoxi, Chao, and Po-Wei, and I don't even know who are there, but I still have contact with people like Joy Lu, yeah.

MS: Ok, yeah, well Joy's still around, sort of, right.

JO: Mmhm, and thanks to Facebook and things like that.

MS: Yeah yeah.

JO: So we exchange information of the performers and when I need somebody to lecture on Chinese percussion, Po-Wei could come, so that kind of sort of mutual help is still going on.

MS: Well that's a very nice network. So there's still an active network there.

JO: Mmhmm. Yes, yes.

MS: So you didn't really have any connection with the older Japanese music tradition at Wesleyan, because it was gone so much, way before you came.

JO: There was a vacuum. Of course, I could see the instruments that Tsuge brought in music instrument collection, and then the recordings in the world music archives, but no, like, human resources there.

MS: When was, but that was, when was the koto teacher, when were the koto teachers, I forget now.

JO: Right, Masayo was there.

MS: She was there, so there was still something going on.

JO: Right, and then she was, I think her program was supported by the big grant at the time, so she was having a big office, and having like 20 undergraduate students, and some Sawai people came so I took lessons every semester. Shamisen and koto. And that was something very new to me [laughs]. So I started learning traditional Japanese instruments at Wesleyan. Yeah.

MS: How did that factor into your thinking? You know, you had to come to Wesleyan to add the Japanese tradition, you know.

JO: It's very bizarre. I thought I was always a contemporary music theorist [laughs] and then, but as I went into the master's program and then Ph.D., started thinking about getting a job, it became more and more unpractical, going back to Japan after our son was born, so how I market myself, prepare myself for the job market, it is unthinkable that people would buy me as a, you know, salsa scholar, or West African drumming specialist. There are a few cases, but when international students come, there are certain expectations, yeah. And then I came to terms with it, it's ok, and especially I developed a strong connection with shamisen, and I still perform. I was in New York this past weekend, helping Masayo's recital.

MS: Oh, really. Is she still in New York?

JO: Yeah.

MS: Oh yeah. I really had no idea where she went.

JO: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Nice.

JO: She has a Sawai koto school, New York branch or something.

MS: Oh, I see.

JO: Yeah, she has whole bunch of students. And then it's too far for me to commute but I go there occasionally, I go once every semester to, like, refresh my technique. Learning something. So, yeah.

MS: Oh, that's very nice.

JO: So, the Wesleyan connection. [laughs]

MS: So yeah, it was still there. Yeah, in the '90s it was still there. And then it disappeared completely, and now all we do is taiko, which is of course an entirely different ballgame, you know. That's the only Japanese thing we do but it's like, you know, no connection with the older traditions.

JO: I know, yeah. It reflects what represents Japanese music, so nowadays, if we say, even "world music" like Japanese in '60s and '70s, if you say "world music," gagaku, koto, shamisen, kabuki, those things are sort of, you know, typical items in the program. But now everyone is talking about taiko, and there's a big international conference, and, I'm kind of ambivalent about that.

MS: Right, yeah.

JO: But it happens. And I think for educational purposes, because it could take a lot of people without any experience, so it works, I think, for its own purpose.

MS: Yeah, yeah. And now it's very popular, and very effective, in its way. But it's kind of too bad.

JO: Right, yeah.

MS: Yeah, I did talk to Tsuge lately and it was nice to, that was very nice because he's talking about the time before even I was there, you know, back in the '60s, you know.

JO: Yes, yeah.

MS: And so, it was nice to talk to him. He's fine.

JO: Mmhhh. Wow. When was he at Wesleyan, exactly?

MS: Uh, wait, now I'm forgetting. Something like 1966? or '68?

JO: Ok.

MS: And he stayed right through, wow, I've forgotten the dates now. It was very long time, because he came as a graduate student.

JO: Mmhmm.

MS: You know, doing Iranian music. And he kind of—then we brought Japan and he stayed as the Japanese contact person.

JO: Yes.

MS: And then he was curator of instruments, and you know, it went on and on and on. I think it was actually early '80s before he left.

JO: Oh, really, oh.

MS: I'd have to check now, I don't remember. I just talked to him, but it was a long time.

JO: That might be true. Yeah, because, Koizumi Fumio was holding the position in the University of Fine Arts, there was no other ethnomusicology position, so Tsuge just came back to that college after Koizumi passed away. So he might have been staying at Wesleyan until the mid '80s.

MS: Till we cut, you know those positions got cut, in the late '70s we lost positions because the university was going bankrupt then.

JO: Really!

MS: And we lost Japanese and we lost North Indian music then.

JO: Oh! We had North Indian music!

MS: Yeah, for quite a while. Yeah. And those got lost and you know we kept all the others, it was still pretty big, but it was a shame because I really enjoyed having the Japanese music there, the shakuhachi and you know, it was just wonderful.

JO: Yeah.

MS: But, you know, that's what happens.

JO: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I guess taiko is fine. You know, a lot of undergrad students take it.

MS: Yeah, they do. That way we could impress Barack Obama when he came. [both laugh]

JO: Yes.

MS: He was kind of surprised, looking around, all these young women playing taiko at this commencement instead of some marching band or something. He was kind of, "Oh, you people do *this*?"

JO: And I think the choreography is pretty spectacular. So, I think, for that kind of show...

MS: It works. Right.

JO: Really, really good. Yeah.

MS: So did you, what did you do outside the department? Other courses, other professors?

JO: Um, because my topic was historical ethnomusicology, I had worked with Bill Johnston.

MS: Uh huh, right.

JO: Both for my master's and Ph.D. Also I took sociology course with Rob Rosenthal.

MS: Oh, ok.

JO: Yeah, so. I was interested in taking gender courses, but because when I started Wesleyan's music program my son was two and a half, and my time was really limited, so I could do only, you know, what I could afford. So there was probably, outside the music program, my activities was very limited. That was a shame, and it was kind of sad when some other students were much more active with the performance and collaborative activities.

MS: Uh huh.

JO: But, um, I had a goal and focus so, yeah. And then I think it worked. I got a job and I'm staying here [laughs] so it's fine with me.

MS: And you went off to Tennessee, which was...

JO: [makes a funny face]

MS: Really radically different environment.

JO: Yeah!

MS: Were you able to use any Wesleyan ideas there?

JO: I tried! [laughs] Yes, yeah. And yeah, my Asian studies department chair was very very supportive. But music people were very difficult. They have a very set idea about what "music" means and [shakes head] yeah.

MS: Yeah, right.

JO: And students were very conservative. But coming back to Hampshire.

MS: Well, that's a big difference.

JO: Right. So a lot of things, I thought, was a disadvantage, turned out to be—well I think I gained a new perspective, like, I thought it was so uncomfortable teaching ethnomusicology

courses to the students whose sort of primary music experience is an Anglican church choir [both laugh] Yeah. It's a typical town-gown divide, and there are a lot of old-timey music circles, and then down the road, Nashville is very close but students' musical world was very limited. But, I am teaching music theory course at Hampshire now and it was so easy to teach music theory to the students with choir backgrounds! [both laugh]

MS: Right, right, so there you are. Right, yeah, so it's a trade off.

JO: Yeah, yeah. So I thought, geez, it was difficult, but now I am complaining like, wow. My background is keyboardist, so teaching music theory to guitar, to primarily guitarists and drummers is such a challenge.

MS: Yeah, right. Right, right. So, well, that's kind of the basic things. What other things would you think about in terms of your experience at Wesleyan? What else?

JO: Hmm. I think it's more the perspective. It became clear after I came back to Hampshire, Hampshire doesn't force me to teach any specific courses, so almost every semester I need to design, explore, incorporate different perspectives. And then, so, it's—oftentimes when I write up the syllabus and see my outline, wow, ok, a lot of things I'm drawing from what I have learned from Hampshire-sorry, Wesleyan. In the spring term, I will be teaching encapsulating sounds, that's a sort of intro to organology course, and then it's an organology course but I actually start the first class with Alvin's "I Am Sitting in a Room" [laughs] So that kind of thing. Which may not be usual.

MS: Yeah, right, right. [both laugh]

JO: But it's a very natural thing. When I started thinking about the musical vessel, ok, that's Alvin, so.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

JO: So my connection with the composition, theory people, I recently learned that Jon Barlow passed away.

MS: Yeah.

JO: I knew he wanted—a lot of alumni were talking about how great he was, but he was too sick when I arrived, so I didn't get to study with him.

MS: Yeah, that's too bad.

JO: But there were a lot of sort of broad minded people. And then, um, so that sort of easy footwork, reaching out and working with people with different ideas and perspectives is the strongest thing I learned from Wesleyan. And in my case because I am at Hampshire it is so handy. [laughs]

MS: Exactly. Right. You ended up at the right place. Maybe it's not surprising it's a good fit.

JO: No, yeah. It's very happy coming back to New England, to Wesleyan, so that I could reconnect with people, and then also, given an opportunity to use what I have learned in a teaching context.

MS: Ok. Great. Well, it's really nice to talk about it!

JO: Yes, yeah. It's wonderful. And then it's wonderful, when I go to the conference I often hear about how other people are teaching and in what kind of environment, so I am probably a lucky one. And then if I went back to Japan, the Japanese higher education system is very different, so, well I think, number one, there is probably no position for me, and because I was educated in a very different curricular—I might not fit well even if I got a position, so.

MS: And they're cutting all of the humanities and social science anyway in Japan.

JO: Mmh. Right.

MS: It's pretty shocking, right.

JO: Yeah, yeah.

MS: So, right.

JO: Yeah.

MS: Well, it's good you're, yeah, it's good you are here, and close by.

JO: Thank you.

MS: And it's great to talk.

JO: Yes.

MS: So I'm just going to put these, you know, transcribe it and put the transcription in, maybe online, but maybe in the archives, because I'm sort of hoping somebody will write the great history of Wesleyan someday.

JO: Yeah!

MS: I just wanted to generate some material.

JO: Yeah, I'd love to read and hear what other people are saying. Especially, you know, the previous generation of Japanese scholars.

MS: Yeah.

JO: That I didn't have a direct connection with. So.

MS: Right, right. Well, great to talk and I'm sure I'll see you around.

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JO: Yes, thank you. And I'll keep you posted about the book project.

MS: Yeah, let me know what's happening. Ok, Junko.

JO: Ok, thank you Mark. [waves]

MS: Bye bye.

JO: Bye.