

Kitaro a New Age Pioneer

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It's difficult to describe the music of Kitaro, one of the leading architects of New Age music. But you know it when you hear it: the Zen-like wail of a Japanese flute, the pitter-patter of percussion and the lush melodies played by a soaring synthesizer. And if you've ever had a massage, you've probably blissed out to his exotic, Far Eastern soundscape.

"Each artist has their own sound, so I created my own sounds," said Kitaro, a native of Japan who has lived in Sebastopol since 2005. "The music is deep in nature."

Kitaro and his band will join the Santa Rosa Symphony at the Green Music Center on Feb. 14 to kick off his Symphonic World Tour 2014, with stops in Warsaw, Moscow, Bucharest and Istanbul, among other cities.

"We decided to have the first concert here," the 60-year-old musician said during an interview at Ragle Ranch Park's Peace Garden. "At each venue, we'll play with the local symphony."

The first half-hour of the concert will showcase Kitaro and his band performing works from his 1980 "Silk Road" album, which catapulted the artist onto the international stage. The music was composed for a documentary TV series produced by Japan's national broadcasting organization in the early 1980s. For the rest of the concert, the band and the orchestra will perform arrangements of some of the pivotal works of Kitaro's 35-year career, including pieces from his "Kojiki" and "Heaven & Earth" albums. Conducting the orchestra will be Stephen Small, a classical pianist from New Zealand who orchestrated the parts.

Kitaro first worked with an orchestra while writing the Golden Globe-winning soundtrack to Oliver Stone's 1992 film, "Heaven & Earth."

"I liked the sound, because it was much bigger and very emotional," he said. "I love the strings."

For this concert, his challenge will be to balance the electronic instruments — synthesizer, keyboards, electric violin, bass and drums — with the acoustic, 40-piece orchestra.

"The band will step into the orchestra," he said. "Always, we have to have a conversation (between the two)."

Along with synthesizer, Kitaro will play the Native American flute and the acoustic guitar. His wife, Keiko Takahashi, will play keyboards.

Despite his long, graying hair and goatee, Kitaro still exudes the pixie-like charm of his namesake, a character with flowing locks from a Japanese manga cartoon.

“It's a famous cartoon character in Japan, where the super-kids battle against the bad people,” he said. “I got that nickname because of my long hair.”

Born Masanori Takahashi in Toyohashi, Kitaro picked up the electric guitar in high school, then moved on to keyboards, drums, bass and flute. He now plays about 50 instruments and has a vast collection of traditional instruments from all over the world.

“In the instrument, we can see all the cultures,” he said. “We see how they created sounds.”

After graduating from college, Kitaro joined the Far East Family Band, a legendary group that fused ethnic music with psychedelic rock.

“The old days, it was a good time,” he said. “We had recording sessions in England, and finally we broke up (in 1977)... That's when I became a solo artist.”

Like many rock musicians, Kitaro composes and performs by ear, without reading or writing music.

“Harmony is always vibrating,” he explained. “And if the sound is fighting, we know.”

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 left a deep impression on the artist, inspiring him to launch the Ku-Kai project, named after a famous Japanese monk who built 88 temples on Shikoku Island, each with a different bell.

“Each bell resonates, and it heals our spirit,” he said. “So I recorded all the temple bells, and each one inspired a composition.”

So far, he has written 39 Ku-Kai works and produced four albums, each one nominated for a Grammy. He still has 49 to go. His latest album, “Final Call,” was inspired by the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima. It was nominated for a 2014 Grammy award in the New Age category.

But that label doesn't mean a lot to this independent-minded musician, who always has marched to the beat of his own drum.

“New Age or Old Age?” he said with an impish grin. “Why not Nice Age?”

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