

# The Kavli IPMU Orchestra

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**The orchestra at the Kavli IPMU grew out of a performance by some of its members on the occasion of the inaugurational ceremony of the institute. Organised by dedicated staff of the institute administration, and borne by the interest and enthusiasm of its participants, its performances and weekly practice sessions continue to be one of the main social activities at the Kavli IPMU. In the following, the author collects some personal memories of his experiences in the orchestra.**

It was shortly after my first arrival at the IPMU in November 2009 when I, passing by a seminar room late in the evening, perceived something that, after a second of doubt in which I was unsure whether I had not just witnessed the last scream of a bird being prey to a triumphant cat, could in fact be nothing else but the first tones of an aspiring violinist. Curiosity struck me, and upon entering the room I found one of our professors, indeed being engaged in the presumed activity. I expressed my admiration that he, being a little older than me after all and bearing all the duties of a professor at the IPMU, still had the energy to undertake such an endeavour as taking up an instrument, but was even more astonished to hear that not only had he begun taking classes, but even did so in order to participate at a musical event planned for the ceremony for the inauguration of the institute at Tokyo University which was about to take place in the following spring. Maybe my signs of



compassion had told him that it was in fact my own experience which made me not completely unaware of the hardships adepts encounter in the beginning of their violin education—and indeed I have been wrestling with the instrument at an earlier stage—but be this as it may, when I walked out of the room a little later I had received explicit orders to bring my own instrument from Europe, and to participate in the rehearsals and at the ceremony.

Hence I joined the IPMU orchestra in February 2010. At that time, the orchestra consisted of a flute, an oboe, a piano, a viola, a couple of violins, and a conductor. The director of the institute, Hitoshi Murayama, was to join in at a later stage with the contrabass. I do not know precisely how the orchestra has come to existence and if it was planned as a permanent institution from the very beginning, but I think that it was not really clear whether it would last beyond the ceremony it was initially created for. From the beginning it has been administered and organised by two of our secretaries, Rieko Tamura and Kotoe Kawajiri, who in their capacity as organisers form the heart and soul

of the orchestra, and have been regular participants.

By the time I joined, the pieces we had to practice were already decided, and roles and parts had largely been assigned. Time was precious—all of us being occupied with our individual duties we only managed to meet about once a week, but we set out to practise and play with assiduity. The members of the orchestra were at quite different levels; some had played in student orchestras before, were experienced and used to playing in groups, some were mere beginners, and still others, like me, had had some acquaintance with their instruments, but had not been touching it for a long time. Our conductor, who had just learned the technicalities of his trade from taking a crash course on youtube and had been asked by a slightly worried member of a different nationality whether conducting in a mirror-inverted way was “the usual style of conduction in America”, mastered the baton within a mere few weeks, and fortunately turned out to be gifted with a good feeling for rhythm and dynamics. He forced the orchestra to exercise the pieces measure by measure, until people were actually in tune, together, and listening to each other.

The ceremony was getting closer when we learned that the responsible administration had expressed uneasiness with our choice of pieces. It was in particular one of them, the Kindersymphonie from the time of the first Viennese school, that spurred concerns whether it would be a decent one to be played in front of all the high-ranking and distinguished guests expected at the ceremony. After all, the name, and in particular its English translation “Toy symphony”, was not precisely fit to inspire particular trust in its adequateness for the dignity of the event. It became clear to me only much later that while there is a certain and in fact astonishingly broad number of classical tunes that is very popular in Japan and can be heard everywhere from school

orchestra performances to wedding ceremonies and from TV entertainment to department store background music, the Kindersymphonie does not quite form part of this set. In addition, the event was important for IPMU; the responsible administration could certainly not let things run out of control—hence it is understandable that the issue was raised. However, for various reasons the orchestra liked the Kindersymphonie, we had put quite some work into its preparation, and we stubbornly stuck to our plan to perform it. Finally the event administration gave in—although it had taken some persuasive skills of members of the orchestra, and a final decision in favour of the tune by the director himself.

On the day of the performance we were supported by the director, and also by his daughter, whose cello provided the base so dearly needed both for a completion of the sound spectrum as well as a reference point for the other instruments. We also had support from a couple of professional players who had been hired for the occasion. Together we managed our first performance successfully.

Since this time, the orchestra has continued to practice and perform. Rehearsals take place every week in a seminar room at the institute. There is no particular pressure on people to attend the rehearsals, and while some members participate quite regularly, others flock in and out from week to week according to individual schedule, duties, and mood. We usually practice without a conductor now, and generally over the last two years the composition of the orchestra has changed quite substantially as people come and leave the Kavli IPMU. For a long time the orchestra was without any base instruments, but recently two cello players have joined in, which also adds to the stability and accordance of the other players. We have regular participation of a trumpet, and occasionally viola players, further oboes and other winds, singers, and even drummers who come



to rehearsals or join us during performances. The members include secretaries, students, professors and postdocs alike, and some of them now come from outside of the institute. In some occasions we even had support by professional musicians, who were related either to members of the orchestra or had heard us play at some performance.

Our repertoire—or, rather, the set of pieces we have played or dabbled with—has been as colourful as the composition of the orchestra members. It ranges from classical music—pieces from the baroque, classic, romantic, and modern periods—over jazz tunes, Christmas songs, and songs which are popular in Japan to compositions by members of the orchestra. The orchestra has always been open to suggestions of new pieces from all of its members, an attitude that has been exploited very actively. As we often had to overcome a rather unbalanced instrumentation, pieces were frequently rearranged, or we simply focused on those parts which could be played with the people at hand.

Naturally, as musicians keep coming and going there is not really a set of pieces that the orchestra holds ready on call. In fact the policy has rather been to play whatever comes up instead of working on a basic stock of pieces—an endeavour that would have been rather boring for long-term participants, and of little use for newcomers anyway. Nevertheless some pieces have emerged which have become some sort of standard by now, one of which consists of the

first few measures of Mendelssohn's wedding march. The reason for this is that the orchestra is frequently summoned to play at institute tea times if a member of the institute has entered the state of marriage, an act not completely uncommon as in particular many postdocs are in their early thirties. Besides performing at various occasions during tea time and on institute anniversaries, the orchestra has participated in so-called Waku-Waku concerts—some kind of musical potluck events organised on Today's Kashiwa campus twice a year. Towards the end of the year after the performance at the inauguration party, the orchestra played Corelli's Christmas Concerto at such a Waku-Waku event, and has since been a quite regular participant.

While in the earlier days it had been necessary to actively look for more participants and to advertise the orchestra to potential members, interested people from new generations of postdocs at the Kavli IPMU tend to find their way by themselves. Sometimes they know even before their arrival about the existence of the orchestra, since information can now be obtained from a dedicated Kavli IPMU website. The orchestra has become more visible as an institution for social interaction besides work, and especially due to its policy of non-commitment has always been a pleasant and exciting activity appealing to the broad variety of researchers at the Kavli IPMU.