

"My music is like taking a gentle stroll through a garden"

The Roche Commissions project for 2010 has been awarded to the Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa, who is very impressed by the dialogue that goes on between scientists and artists. He came to visit Roche in Basel in June.

Toshio Hosokawa is not just the most prominent composer in Japan: he is among the world's outstanding contemporary composers. The 53-year-old has been awarded the 2010 commission for contemporary music as part of the Roche Commissions cultural project. This is already the fifth time that Roche has awarded such a commission.

Hosokawa moves freely between different cultures. Born in Hiroshima, he began his studies in Tokyo, before moving to Berlin in 1976 to study composition under Isang Yun at the Hochschule der Künste. He then continued his studies under Brian Ferneyhough and Klaus Huber, whose composition class in the southern German city of Freiburg is one of the world's most important hotbeds of composing talent. Hosokawa's music is characterised by the tension between avant-garde Western and traditional Japanese culture. He has been invited to almost all of the most prestigious festivals of contemporary music as a guest composer or lecturer. He has already received several awards and prizes.

A visit to Basel

Hosokawa needs nature to compose: "My music is like taking a gentle stroll through a garden," he says. Silence plays an important role in his compositions: "The sound emerges from silence, lives, and then retreats into silence once more," explains Hosokawa.

In June, the composer spent one and a half days getting to know Roche at the company's headquarters in Basel. He discussed Japanese and Swiss culture with Chairman of the Board of Directors Franz B. Humer, while CEO Severin Schwan wanted to know whether he thought his roots were in Japan or in Europe – a question that Mr Hosokawa found very difficult to answer. "I prefer to work in Europe, as this is where I have more opportunities to bring my work to life – not least because of the number of very talented musicians here," said the composer. He considers the Japanese less open to new music. But he believes that it is easier to live in one's home country because of the food and the climate.

Moving freely between cultures and disciplines

Meeting scientists is nothing new for Toshio Hosokawa: he spent a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, a meeting point for scientists and musicians. "It was interesting for me to find out how scientists think about nature," he says of the dialogue, which he greatly appreciated. Thus it was with great interest that he followed the explanations of Head of

Pharmaceutical Research Lee Babiss, who spoke about innovation at Roche – above all in oncology.

After lunch, Frank Trach, Head of Biotech Production in Basel, took the composer through the Avastin production process. He explained how the cancer drug works and how it is produced. Hosokawa pricked up his ears at the words "the cell line is immortal". Immortality is something every composer wishes for his works.

The afternoon programme included a highlight that really got the composer's pulse racing: a visit to the Paul Sacher Foundation. The collection built up by the former conductor from Basel who married into the Roche family comprises manuscripts of many works by several prominent composers and artists and has become an important international research centre for 20th and 21st century music. In the vaults of the collection, Hosokawa found not just works by his teachers, but also handwritten originals by Béla Bartok and Igor Stravinsky, at which he took a closer look. As he leafed through the pages almost in awe, his eyes following the neatly inscribed notes of the once scandalous 'The Rite of Spring', his hand began to conduct in mid air.

First performance in 2010

The world première of the piece that Hosokawa will compose for Roche is scheduled for the Lucerne Festival in 2010. This year's festival (from 13 August to 21 September) features the commissioned work of the English composer George Benjamin. The première will be on 30 August at 18.30 in the Konzertsaal. A piece by Toshio Hosokawa can also be heard in Lucerne this year (on 23 August at 11.00 in the Lukaskirche): 'Stunden-Blumen' is a piece for violin, clarinet, cello and piano. And that's not all: at the piano will be Momo Kodama, niece of Chugai's Chief Finance Officer.

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