Montana filmmaker documents power of music in impoverished Africa

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Cellist Josephine Nsimba plays in the street in front of the church where the Orchestre Symphonique Kimbanguiste practices.

Courtesy Jessica Jane Hart

It wasn’t until Kaori Fujii began working with musicians in the Congo that she fully understood the adage, music can connect people. “I always thought of music as a profession, but at the same time I didn’t realize how powerful music can be,” said the Tokyo-born flutist who now resides in New York.

Fujii’s work with the Orchestre Symphonique Kimbanguiste, the only symphony in central Africa, is the center of a short documentary completed recently by Montana filmmaker Jessica Jane Hart. The 11-minute film makes its public debut in Billings Feb. 18 at Art House Cinema.
Titled “Music Beyond,” the documentary may be short, but it’s packed with stunning images of Congolese musicians who began with nothing, describes Pauleth Masamba in the film. “No musicians, no instruments, it was just us, and we started step by step…and today we can say that the foundation on that house is strong, and all that energy came from us.”

Fujii first traveled to Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, five years ago to see if she would be welcomed as a teacher. It took two years and six trips to convince the musicians that she was actually coming back, said Fujii.

“They are used to having promises broken, so they don’t expect a lot and see a lot of people coming and going, but it never sticks.”

Hart was inspired to produce her own film after meeting Fujii and learning of the nonprofit, Music Beyond, Inc., that Fujii founded to fund her work in the Congo. They connected through Fujii’s husband, Eric Cecil, a guitarist and former Miles City resident Hart knew during high school.

In November 2017, Hart and Tarek Fouda, a sound engineer and radio journalist based in Brooklyn, joined Fujii in the Congo and spent five days filming "Music Beyond."

Music for the soul
Fujii's parents were professional musicians, and she was raised in a classical music environment she describes as "almost elitist" and worlds away from the Congolese musicians she now teaches.

“In that environment, sometimes I think we are too caught up with the self-validation and techniques and so-on, rather than the happiness or passion or the connection that music can bring,” Fujii said.

Fujii holds some impressive titles. She’s the youngest Japanese flutist to take first place in the Music Competition of Japan, the Japan Wind and Percussion Competition and the Japan Woodwind Competition. At the height of her career, she was playing 200 concerts a year. She’s performed at Carnegie Hall, The John F. Kennedy Center, Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall, the Alte Oper Frankfurt in Germany, to name a few.

Yet, this esteem and prestige, the fancy concert halls, the five star hotels and first class flights — none of it fulfilled her, she said. "I began to wonder if there was anything I could do as a musician to make even the smallest of difference in a true, meaningful way outside the concert halls and recording studio.”

In 2014, Fujii founded Music Beyond. Since then, she’s visited the Congo three times a year to host intensive clinics, working with ensembles as well as teaching solo lessons. It’s a full day, every day, and she does it for a month at a time.

Each trip, Fujii sees progress. The sole teacher for the organization, Fujii also mentors musicians so they can teach others after she leaves. Her students are dedicated, some picking up techniques that typically take months to master.

Fujii introduced one of her students — a night guard at a Kinshasa shopping center — to a vibrato technique on the flute. “The next day he came to me, and he absolutely nailed it,” Fujii recalled. “He does it regardless of if he has a teacher or not, or enough money or time, he needs to do it. That is keeping him alive and going,” Fujii said.

**Survival through music**

There’s a story told about the Orchestre Symphonique Kimbanguiste starting with a single violin. The instrument was shared among 20 people, some traveling on foot for hours to get a chance to play it.

That violin launched a symphony in Kinshasa that now has more than 200 choir and orchestra members, many of whom are self-taught and continue to
travel long distances to rehearse together. About half the members sing in the choir, and others perform on instruments that they maintain themselves.
Founded in 1994 by Congolese conductor Armand Diangienda, the orchestra slowly amassed instruments, some donated or shipped from relatives in Europe and others were built by orchestra members with resources on-hand. A 2010 German documentary and a 2014 spotlight on CBS’s “60 Minutes” spurred interest and further donations.

Life in Kinshasa is a struggle. It’s a city with upwards of 12 million residents and growing as people move to the city from other parts of war-torn Africa. This influx has been met with massive housing issues and a lack of basic city services. Electricity and water are sparse and intermittent, and many of the homes are substandard one-room structures.

Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the poorest countries in the world, and many residents of Kinshasa earn less than $400 a year, according to Global Finance Magazine. Symphony members are often up before the sun to get to their day jobs, sharing a taxi or walking in the city’s staggering congestion, then attending rehearsals at a local Kimbanguiste church in the evenings.

It’s something that Hart struggles to explain. “I just can’t imagine being that motivated for something,” Hart said. “On the outside, it can seem so insignificant, especially for someone who doesn’t play music, and even for someone who grew up playing music — it’s just hard to imagine being willing to work that hard to get something that is intangible.”

While filming in the Congo, Hart was struck with culture shock, not just from the differences in her American life, but also the stark contrasts between the hotel where they stayed — an area Hart describes as a “safe zone” where many NGO and diplomatic workers are stationed — and the immense poverty and poor infrastructure across the rest of the city.

“You cross a line and you’re in the real Kinshasa,” Hart said.

Despite being a country in political unrest with ongoing corruption and violence, the Democratic Republic of the Congo just experienced its first peaceful transfer of power in decades.

“Democracy is a process,” said Fujii, who maintains a delicate relationship with the Congolese government. She enters the country with the blessing of the government under the protection of the Japanese Embassy, which maintains a presence in the DRC.
“I continue to believe in the Congolese people, who are living day after day with hope in their heart in a place where hope is so hard to come by. Congolese people believe that there will someday be a peaceful Congo,” Fujii said.

### Coming home

Hart and Fouda arrived in Kinshasa just after Thanksgiving in 2017. Each carried one small bag with filming gear to avoid attracting attention as they traveled to Ngiri-Ngiri, a municipality in the Funa district where the orchestra practices.

Both volunteered their time to film and produce the documentary, and some of their travel expenses were offset by fundraising efforts. They received visas from the Embassy of the DRC, in part due to testimonial letters written by Fujii and members of the symphony.

Traveling in a Japanese Embassy vehicle significantly lessened their costs and need for armed security. Hart filmed some of Kinshasa from the vehicle, but at times the driver with would ask her to hide the camera. “The slower you move, the more you see,” Hart said. “A lot of what we experienced we were not able to film.”

The documentary spends a good deal of time focused on an all-female ensemble, which Fujii started in 2017 to “empower women through music.”
Footage captured on the last day of filming shows the female orchestra members performing and speaking at a center for young mothers — many victims of violence and rape — and homeless girls up to age 17. In one of the shots, you see a child sitting on a fence, mimicking the movement of playing violin as the ensemble performs.

“There are 12-year-old mothers just surviving,” Hart described. “And here we are in this super safe diplomat world. It’s just a universe away.”

Hart returned to Billings at Christmastime, and said she felt extreme disconnection.

“I just didn’t talk about it when I got home. If I would start to talk about it, tears would come out of my eyes,” Hart said, but not because she was sad. “It’s like a physical reaction, which is the only way I can put it.” Sharing cuts of the film with Fujii, Hart said they would cry together at this experience.

Hart describes Fujii as a “humble badass.”

“She bounces between these worlds seemingly effortlessly. I know it’s not effortless.”

In going back and forth, Fujii said she no longer experiences culture shock, but “probably I became more patient of a person after coming back.”
Her first experiences in the Congo were shocking. “You do see poverty all over the place. You see starving children and people trying to put the next meal on the table, literally,” Fujii said. “It’s hard to see it, but it becomes normal. When you come back…it’s more artificial here.”

Her recurring thought, upon returning to her life in New York: “How could we manage to be so unhappy with everything that we have?”

Fujii said she doesn’t feel bad about her success or her material possessions. “If (Congolese) have the choice of having things, they would have things, too, but at the same time I don’t complain. If anything, I am more thankful for having things rather than feeling guilty. The guilt is not going to help them.”

To make her work in the Congo possible, Fujii cut back significantly on live performances. She continues to teach private lessons and picks up gigs to pay the bills.

“It was the worst decision by far that I’ve made financially, but the best decision that I’ve ever made as a person,” Fujii said.
During an intense day of rehearsal violinist Dauphine Mata takes a break escaping some of the heat on the cool tile floor of the practice room.

Courtesy Jessica Jane Hart

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