# Tomoko Shimada

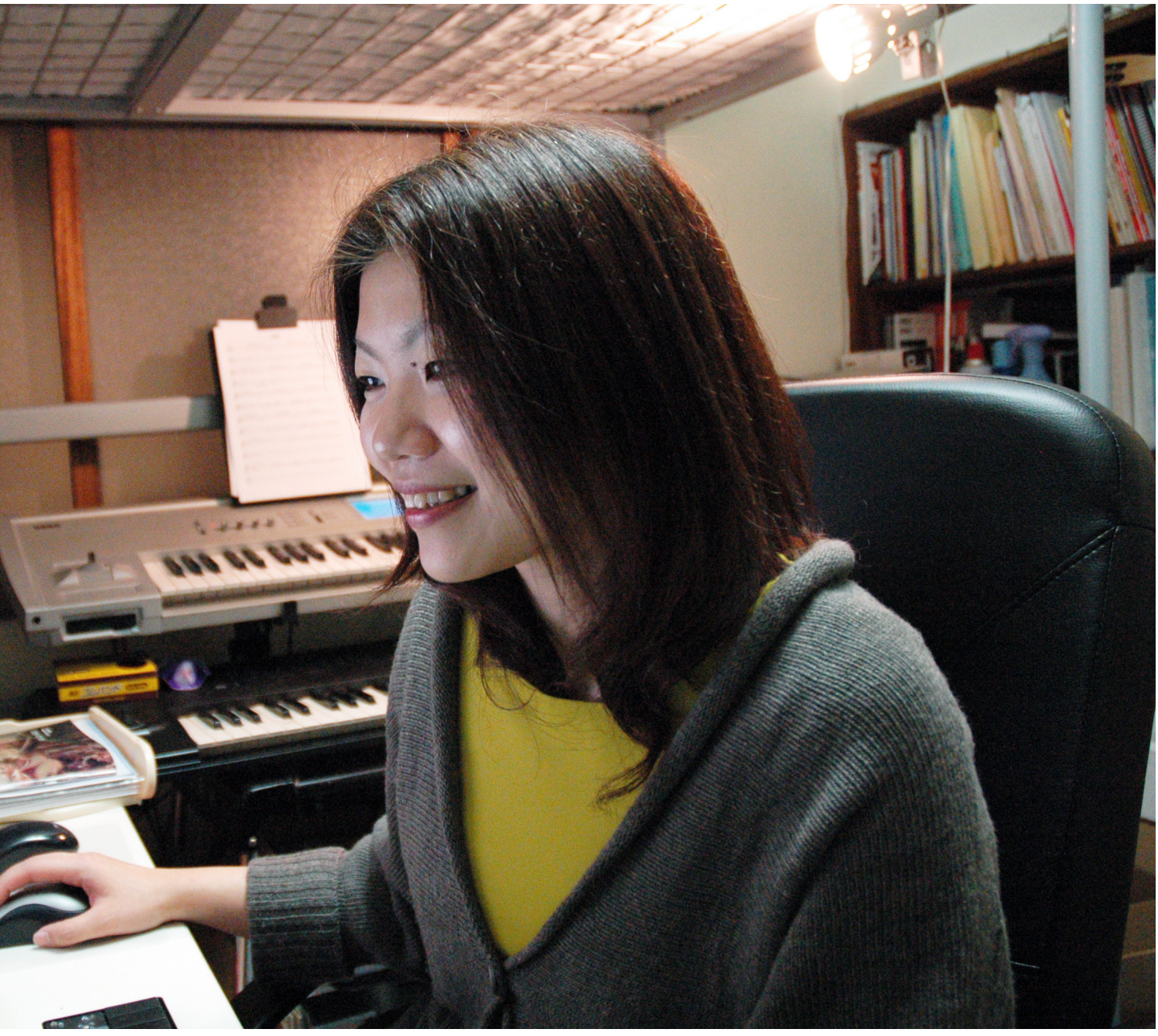
INTERVIEW BY **ANNEKE MAJORS** | PHOTOS BY **TOMOKO SHIMADA**

As a missionary living in the bouncing cosmopolitan port city of Yokohama, Japan, I was accustomed to being surrounded with tantalizing hints of world culture — culture I was trying to avoid. But it hummed like an electric undercurrent, splashing around me in the form of bright posters in the trains, soggy flyers trampled under commuter feet in the station, epic graffiti scrawled across the carefully groomed urban district of Sakuragi-chou. And, as the time neared for me to go home, some of it began sneaking into my suitcases.

The last preparation day I spent in Yokohama before I went home to the States was for paying attention to packing details and running errands. The collapsible pull-handle on my suitcase was jammed and wasn't so collapsible anymore, so we took it two doors down from our little apartment on a windy narrow street in Hongou-chou and knocked on the door, hoping Brother Shimada was home. Luckily the family was there and we were greeted by Brother and Sister Shimada, who had just returned from Hiroshima, the third of several missions they've served together. Their daughter Tomoko came out of her studio in the back room, headphones still around her neck, and greeted us warmly. I explained to them my suitcase dilemma and asked if they might be able to think of a way to either repair the handle or maybe at the least have some sort of a tool to cut it off so I could make it onto the airplane. "Oh — are you transferring?" Brother Shimada asked. "The Eternal Transfer," his savvy wife explained.

As they got to work with the suitcase and fed us all sorts of hospitable bean cakes and warm barley tea, I had a favor to ask Tomoko. I knew she worked in music of some sort, and I knew she was in the right demographic to have trustworthy taste.

"Tomoko Shimai, I haven't been able to listen to Japanese music while I'm a missionary, but I want to get some to take home with me. I was wondering if you had any recommendations?"




Her eyes lit up. Not only did she have recommendations, but she sent me home with a stack of CDs, some studio demos, and some shrink-wrapped commercial releases: some J-Pop and some earnest efforts by Japanese Mormons to record spiritually uplifting music in their native tongue. It ended up being one of the souvenirs I treasured most.

I now keep in touch with Tomoko through blogs and that blessed whimsical contraption that is Facebook, and I was pleased to get to interview her for *Mormon Artist* and find out a little bit more about her life and career:

**When did you first get started in music?**

I started to take piano lessons when I was four years old, and I played in my first band as a drummer when I was fifteen. I became a keyboardist in a band when I was in college, about eighteen years old. At the same time, I started learning about the computer and music, just by myself—I didn't go to any school. I just read magazines and stuff and learned it.

**What style of music are you most interested in?**

Acid jazz, soul and funk. I like the old music.

**And you learned that through playing with the band? Or through learning yourself?**

Both. I've gone through almost all kinds of music so far. Rock, heavy metal, jazz, pop, country music. Just everything.

**Tell us about your job and about the music that you do on your own.**

My music work is mostly for commercial products, like PlayStation games and PC video games, and also for ringtones.

And I arrange piano versions of songs. Today I arranged some J-Pop music for ringtones.

**Who do you work for?**

I work as a freelancer for lots of different clients — I don't belong to any company.

**When you're not making music for work, what kind of music do you make on your own?**

Pop music or piano house music. Also trance. I'm into club music these days.

**What part of your music or your job do you think is the most challenging?**

When I don't have enough time to create the music. Sometimes they give me a very short schedule, and there are many things that I want to put into the music but, because of the time constraints, I can't. I don't like that.

**What's the most fun part of it?**

It's fun all the time, actually, because I just love the music. It's fun to work with the music.

**What was it like for you growing up LDS in Japan?**

I don't think it's hard. And I don't think it's hard even today, but I think I'm very different from others. Not only being LDS but being a Christian is very different in Japan. Sometimes people ask me a lot of questions about Christianity. I like that.

**How has being LDS affected your music and your career?**

I didn't care about this when I was a lot younger, but lately I feel I'm supposed to use my musical talent for the Lord's work. I want to create music that can help people to be uplifted, to be happy, and to be touched. But sometimes it's very hard — for my job, I have to make some "moody" music, so I have to be careful. I don't want to make people sad through my music.

**What are your dreams for the future?**

My current position is as composer and arranger, so it's production work. But I want to become a professional player, instead.

I play in a band as a hobby today, but someday I want to release a CD from the Mission label.

**Has teaching music been a good experience? What have you learned?**

It's been a very good experience. My students are not familiar with the music at all. Their school is for game programmers, not for musicians. So, they really don't know about the music.

Last year they asked me, "So teacher, what is a melody?" I had a hard time answering that question.

But I found out if I teach them in detail, step by step, they get it so quickly, and they have fun with the music. They couldn't do anything in the beginning, but they can now compose their own music, and that's a lot of growth.

**From your own experience, what advice would you give to young LDS people who want to have a future in music?**

Becoming a professional musician is very, very hard. Of course you need the musical skills and some good sense, but it's not the most important thing, I think. The most important thing is the communication skills and your heart.

If you have a desire to help people with your music, I think you will be a success. ▪

*I want to create music that can help people to be uplifted, to be happy, and to be touched.*