

“My father carried a lot of scars from the war, but he never talked about his experiences,” Ishibashi says. “That led me to want to learn the history between Manchuria and Japan; the genocides that happened there. I realised there’s very little writing around this, and that led me to think about how perhaps victims can’t necessarily talk about it.

“There is a sense of Japan tending to close off from things that have happened—perhaps it has something to do with the fact that it’s an island country. It tends to also hide away certain facts and history, and carry on as if nothing had happened. In textbooks we don’t learn about Japan and its history as an oppressor, a coloniser, especially after the first world war. There’s a sense that it’s OK to not be learning about these things.”

A longtime collaborator has been her romantic partner Jim O’Rourke, who has a similarly blithe approach to style and genre, and his own set of pop-adjacent masterpieces on Drag City. They met when she played flute on a 2015 Burt Bacharach covers album he was producing, and he has since played on and mixed the Hamaguchi soundtracks. They live together and work in close physical proximity, but keep a professional distance, sending each other data files to work on rather than jamming. “In terms of what we do together, it’s film watching—generally speaking we’ll both work until 9pm, cook a meal together, and end the day watching two films.”

Cool data exchange or not, is there a danger to working so closely and constantly with one’s partner? “I don’t necessarily think there is,” she replies happily. “Jim has his own career he’s built through his music, and for me he was someone who was in a band I’ve loved since I was in high school [Gastr Del Sol], so he’s almost a teacher figure for me as well. Jim is also very kind and generous—I really only have a sense of being grateful for him.” Last year they released an album together, the challenging soundscapes of *Lifetime of a Flower*, though I shamelessly long for some collaborative songwriting. “Maybe one day, when we’re both old people together!”

Hopefully there will be more collaborations with Hamaguchi, too—none are planned, and Ishibashi is finishing up another song-based solo album, but says she would love to work with the director again. “One of the things I find special about Hamaguchi is his belief in the viewer’s ability and strength to observe, and watch something,” which plays out in *Evil Does Not Exist*’s unhurried takes and *Drive My Car*’s three-hour runtime.

“He’s also interested in listening and hearing the voice of the voiceless; the voices we don’t necessarily hear. That’s also how I want to make music. I want to trust the ears of the listeners of my music—and not necessarily be tuned into the louder voices.” ♦

### Coming soon to Acropolis:

- *Matt and Mara* (Dir. Kazik Radwanski, 2024)—October 10 at 2220 Arts + Archives, with Kazik Radwanski and actress Deragh Campbell in person
- *Time of the Seasons: Two Films* by Vadim Kostrov—October 16 at 2220 Arts + Archives, with Vadim Kostrov in person
- *Directors’ Fortnight 2024*: Los Angeles—November 1-3 at the Culver Theater, featuring seven films from this year’s Quinzaine des cinéastes in Cannes

## Acropolis Cinema and the Yanai Initiative present:



September 28, 2024 - 2220 Arts + Archives



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# ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Acropolis welcomes multi-instrumentalist composer Eiko Ishibashi, who scored director Ryūsuke Hamaguchi's Oscar-winning *Drive My Car* (2021), for the Los Angeles premiere of their latest collaboration, *GIFT*, which features a silent film directed by Hamaguchi, accompanied by a live soundtrack performed by Ishibashi. This project originated when Ishibashi asked Hamaguchi to create visuals to accompany her live performance. Hamaguchi decided to create a film with dialogue as a starting point, then turn it into a silent film for Ishibashi's live performance. Consequently, the project yielded two distinct works: a live score film performance, *GIFT*, and a feature film, *Evil Does Not Exist* (2023). *GIFT* offers a constantly-evolving cinematic experience, with Ishibashi's improvised live performance intervening in Hamaguchi's visuals, seeking to reimagine the relationships between sound, image, and narrative. *Co-presented by the Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities.*

TRT: 75 min

In person: Eiko Ishibashi

## GIFT by Ben Beaumont-Thomas

*The following is an article originally published by The Guardian, April 8, 2024*

Whether it's Hitchcock and Herrmann, Spielberg and Williams or latterly Villeneuve and Zimmer, film directors often get into a glorious feedback loop with a preferred composer—and the latest is a burgeoning collaboration between Ryūsuke Hamaguchi and Eiko Ishibashi. Her jazz-pop theme for *Drive My Car* in 2021 was an instant classic—wistful, generous of spirit, even a little Gallic with its touch of accordion—and her score helped to carry the Japanese film to glory at Cannes and beyond, including a best picture nomination and best international feature film award at the Oscars in 2022.

“There was a big awards rush, festivals, and I think Hamaguchi was ultimately quite fatigued from the whole experience,” Ishibashi says, elegantly wrapped up in her cold-looking recording studio in the Yatsugatake mountains west of Tokyo, speaking via interpreter over a video call. “So I think he wanted to do something that was more experimental next. And myself, I'm interested in experimenting with what kinds of work I can do along with images.”

The result is a pair of astonishing new films in which the bond between director and composer is even more tightly fused: the drama *Evil Does Not Exist* and a short film, *Gift*, which is silent and designed to be paired with live performance by Ishibashi. Hamaguchi has described the two films, which use different takes, shots and narrative details from the same shoot, as a “small multiverse”.

*Gift* was the initial idea, after Ishibashi asked Hamaguchi for concert visuals and sent him demo pieces for inspiration. Hamaguchi went big, travelling to film near where Ishibashi lives, and even developing a script that wouldn't be heard but would guide the actors in the silent film. “Hearing them on set saying these lines, he realised they had wonderful voices; the acting was wonderful,” Ishibashi explains.

So Hamaguchi expanded the film on the fly to make *Evil Does Not Exist*, a parable about the schism between urban and rural, between capitalism and its muffled opposite, as a glamping company arrogantly rocks up with plans to site a development in a peaceful village. The camera lovingly and languorously settles on feathers, leaves and brooks, and Ishibashi's music is often beautiful to match. But violence and discord throb in the film's bones, from the faraway gunshots of deer hunters to the way Hamaguchi will suddenly cut an Ishibashi piece down in its prime, leaving sudden silence.

“I felt an anger that I hadn't felt in his past films,” she says. “Anger that felt directed towards the way humans work, the unfairness of this whole world.” Watching the raw footage, she says she drew on that feeling to create the film's central musical theme: long, gorgeous overlapping chords for strings that take left turns into darkness.

But anger and alienation have always been burning away in Ishibashi's work, even if, as in *Evil Does Not Exist*, you can't always feel its heat. “I've heard Hamaguchi talk about this, about my music having a sense of violence,” she says. “He was kind enough to say that along with the violence there's also a sense of beauty! But he did say he felt there was anger, constantly. Anger is one source of energy that compels me forward—that includes the sense of friction I feel when I face society, and friction I feel towards my own self.”

Now 49, Ishibashi traces that feeling back to high school, when she would idly make music with no intention of playing it to anyone. “I had no desire to become or be anything at that point—I sort of wanted life to hurry up and be over. I was making music because I had nothing else to do.” This was in the early 1990s, when Japan's economic bubble had burst. “The atmosphere really changed. I was raised until high school to keep going, do the right thing, and that if you study hard you'll be able to work in a certain company and have this kind of future. But at that point, I realised all of this can go to waste. I started to think: going to high school doesn't matter, why don't I go watch movies and make music instead?”

Ishibashi played piano, recorded the sound of a nearby factory as a rhythm section—field recordings are still a key part of her work—and later played the drums in the rock band Panicstyle. In her family home her father was always playing film music, which she says influenced the styles she breezes across today as a composer, singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist: in one project she might be making deeply experimental musique concrète, in the next she will be making mellifluous vocal pop. “I was raised in a way where I wasn't thinking about genres and boundaries,” she says.

It's only in recent years that she became a full-time musician, after doing part-time jobs for most of her life. “I don't feel I've made a career out of music—it's more that through trial and error I realised I'm not good at many things,” she says with droll self-mockery. “I worked in the complaints office for Pepsi vendors; the reception for an AOL provider office; as a nude model in the art world; in public playgrounds for children. For a long time I was a care worker, especially for elderly people and those with disabilities. I've found myself with music as something that's left in me.”

In the past decade, three superb albums—*Imitation of Life*, *Car and Freezer*, and *The Dreams My Bones Dream*—were released by US label Drag City, and made her better known to American and European audiences. The latter is a reflection on Manchuria, an area of China named by its colonising Japanese forces—her late father was once based with the military there. Once again, it's beautiful music laced with disquiet.