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## Megumi Kanda AMAZING GRACE



A photograph of Megumi Kanda, a woman with dark hair, smiling and holding a gold trombone. She is wearing a black leather jacket, a beige scarf with a teal stripe and fringe, and blue jeans. She is standing outdoors, leaning against a stone wall with trees in the background.

# Megumi Kanda

## AMAZING GRACE

Megumi Kanda with her Greenhoe GC4-1R  
trombone (2017). Photo courtesy of Greenhoe  
Trombones/Schilke.

神田めぐみ ~ アメージング・グレイス

# 2020 ITA Award Recipient

by Douglas Yeo

ダグラス・ヨー

Birth is a tumultuous event. Just ask any mother. But when Elizabeth and Eisuke Kanda's second child was born in Nagoya, Japan, there were complications, and their young daughter's life hung in the balance. In those chaotic moments, prayers were offered, and the child survived by, in her mother's words, "the grace of God." The Kandas named her めぐみ. Megumi. For her mixed nationality family, the name had a special meaning. Because in Japanese, Megumi means *grace*.

Today, we know Megumi Kanda as the acclaimed principal trombonist of the Milwaukee Symphony, and we celebrate her as recipient of the 2020 ITA Award. But there is so much more to her, and we should not think of her simply as one who has reached the top echelon of trombonists. Here is some more of the remarkable story of a remarkable woman, Megumi Kanda. *Amazing Grace*.<sup>1</sup>

It was at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois—thirty miles north of Chicago's Loop—that Megumi's parents met. Her father was a student, a native of Japan who was in the United States pursuing a seminary degree. Her mother—from Mars, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh—made extra money by typing papers for Trinity students. Eisuke Kanda got more than he bargained for when he hired Elizabeth Marie Hoffman to type his thesis. The two fell in love, moved to Japan, and got married in Kawaguchi, just outside of Tokyo. Eisuke began a career as National Director of Japan Campus Crusade for Christ. He later went on to be Executive Director of Food for the Hungry Japan, and since 2010 has been founder and representative for a new ministry, Friends With the Voiceless International. Elizabeth continues to play piano at Musashino Chapel Center where the Kandas have worshipped since Megumi's childhood.<sup>2</sup>



Megumi in her elementary school band, Tokyo (1986)

Megumi began piano lessons when she was six years old after her family moved to Tokyo. She recalls, “I hated it when I first started. I never practiced and my teacher told me that I was the worst student she had ever had. She also told me that I had no musical talent whatsoever.” At age 10, Megumi wanted to play clarinet along with her best friend, but the only instrument left to play in her school band was the trombone. Megumi didn’t choose the trombone; the trombone chose her. Megumi’s mother heard gospel trombonist Bill Pearce through his Chicago-based radio program *Nightwatch* (later, the show became *Nightsounds*).<sup>3</sup> Megumi recalls her mother saying that “the trombone is the most beautiful instrument and that I should play with a melted butter sound just like Bill Pearce.” Mother and daughter began playing together in church, using some of Pearce’s arrangements. When asked if she ever played any traditional Japanese instruments, Megumi admitted that she tried learning the *shakuhachi*, a Japanese longitudinal bamboo flute. “I wasn’t good at it,” she said, “but it was fun!”

While in middle school and through her years at Toho Gauken High School of Music in Tokyo, Megumi studied with Sumio Miwa, then second trombonist of the NHK Symphony. “He was a wonderful, nurturing, and fun teacher,” Megumi recalled. “He was most excellent about teaching me important things like how to breathe, stay relaxed, and he gave me a lot of freedom to be creative.” In comments prepared for this article, Miwa *sensei* (the Japanese honorific term for “teacher”) remembered Megumi as an exceptional student and person:

When she came to me, Megumi was a vivacious and charming girl who was not afraid to express herself. She never needed to hear the same thing twice; she always mastered whatever I taught her by the next lesson. She never had to be told to practice. She utilized the talent she had and kept challenging herself with new repertoire at an amazing rate; her



Megumi with Sumio Miwa (1990)

musical expression is exceptional. Megumi never just played notes but wanted to express something that was behind the music. I am so proud of her.

Yet with success came a downside. Megumi recalls that the disparaging comments of her piano teacher—“She saw no talent in me whatsoever”—stuck with her. Megumi worked hard to prove her wrong, and success on the trombone came early, including winning a competition sponsored by the Japanese Association of Trombonists. “But,” Megumi said, “I felt pressure to be good all the time and be the next star. That had a very negative effect on me.” She got very nervous before performances, developed cold sores on her lips, and would often throw up before going on stage. “I loved playing but the side effects of performing were torturing me.” Something had to change.

At seventeen, Megumi—having switched from her Yamaha YSL-354 to a Bach 42B—attended a Yamaha Brass Seminar. There she met Mark Gould, then principal trumpet with the Metropolitan Opera. The two discussed her desire to come to the United States to study and after hearing her play, Gould told her “he had a good idea.” A few months later, Megumi received a fax from James DeSano, then principal trombonist of the Cleveland Orchestra. Gould had told DeSano about Megumi and an audition was arranged when the Cleveland Orchestra was touring Japan. After playing for DeSano and Cleveland Orchestra principal trumpet Michael Sachs, Megumi was accepted to the Cleveland Institute of Music. But there was a problem. Megumi’s family was not one of great means; finances were tight. Help came from Megumi’s “sassy grandma,” Mutsuko Kanda, who lived to be one hundred years old. Mutsuko was a role model for Megumi and with her encouragement and investment in her education, and the financial sacrifices of her parents, Megumi headed to the United States. Little did she know what was ahead.



Megumi with James DeSano (1997)

Since her childhood, Megumi's family and Japanese friends always called her Meg. They still do. It was a natural nickname for one named Megumi, and it was versatile in English-speaking circles. But upon arrival in Cleveland, a problem immediately arose. Megumi's roommate also was Meg. Two Megs in one room caused confusion, so Meg Kanda became known as Megumi. Later, after her marriage to Dietrich Hemann, she recalled that, "The image gap between Megumi Kanda and Meg Hemann is hilarious, but that's me!"

Excited about her new life in Cleveland—where she began playing a Benge 190 trombone—and the new playing opportunities that were before her, Megumi's tendency to practice too much finally caught up with her: her embouchure gave out from overuse and she could not play at all. The pain in her face was excruciating, and medical specialists did not know if she would ever play again. "I devoted my whole youth to the trombone, and here I was in a new country with no family and very few friends to talk to," she said. "I just painted pictures for hours every day, just so I didn't have to think about the trombone."

But there was hope in the midst of the storm. Her teacher, James DeSano, had previously dealt with brass poisoning in his lips and understood the long road back to playing after an injury. Slowly, beginning with just a few minutes a day for several months, DeSano helped Megumi regain her ability to buzz by concentrating on air speed and support. "I had to relearn everything, and it took about a whole year to recover from the injury." Even so, "it was an exciting time." "In hindsight," she recalls, "getting injured was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Most people gave up on me, so I had no expectations anymore. I also realized that being able to play anything is a gift." Megumi credits DeSano with helping put her life and playing back together. Her admiration of and gratitude for him continues to this day, "I can easily say that I would probably not be playing today if he wasn't my teacher,



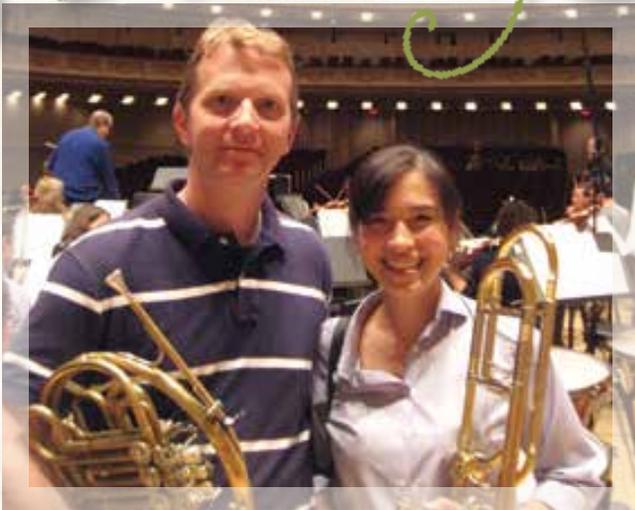
Megumi's mother, Megumi, Megumi's grandma, Megumi's uncle, Jim, and Megumi's father (1998)

and my playing and teaching remain heavily influenced by him." That admiration goes both ways. In an interview for this article, DeSano said:

It was a privilege to have had Megumi as a student and be her mentor. My teacher, Emory Remington, was all about foundational air speed and the shape of air. Going through Megumi's injury experience along with her was the most enlightening experience of learning what Remington instilled in me. She really wanted to learn, was a great listener, and worked so hard. I feel that I learned more from her than she possibly could have learned from me. It was a great blessing to have worked with her and I'm so thankful for the success that she's had. As I look back and reflect on my career, well, she was the one.

With her injury behind her, "the young musician who worried about what people thought was gone, and I started a new life from scratch with joy and gratitude." Prior to graduating from Cleveland Institute of Music in 1998, Megumi switched to a Conn 88-H and in 1997, she auditioned for the principal trombone position in the Albany Symphony. After a final round that included her playing passages from Mahler Symphony 3, Ravel *Bolero*, Schumann Symphony 3, and Beethoven Symphony 5—a sequence she was asked to play three times—she was declared the winner. For three years she led a section that included Cathy Stone (second), Craig Arnold (bass) and Matthew Gaunt (tuba). "We were all so young," she said about her Albany Symphony section. "We didn't have much money, but we had so much fun."

In 2000, Megumi auditioned for the Montreal Symphony, a frustrating experience that included her accidentally letting go of her slide during the playing of an excerpt from Rossini's *William Tell Overture*—"it went flying across the stage!" Ready



Dietrich and Megumi Hemann at Carnegie Hall (2012)



Japanese calligraphy rendering of  
“Megumi” drawn by Megumi Kanda.



Milwaukee Symphony low brass section, Carnegie Hall (2012):  
Megumi, Kirk Ferguson, John Thevenet, Randall Montgomery

to head home at 11:00 p.m. after the audition was over, she called her friend and roommate, pianist Mitsuko Morikawa, who confessed that she had sent Megumi’s résumé—without Megumi’s knowledge—to the Rochester Philharmonic along with a deposit for a spot in their second trombone audition the next day. With nothing on her calendar, Megumi drove through the night from Montreal to Rochester—with some naps along the way—for a 9:00 a.m. audition slot. “I honestly didn’t even know what was on the list, but I just played whatever was asked. Pure adrenalin.” If ignorance is bliss, Megumi had discovered the most unique strategy to winning an audition.

Megumi remembers her year in the Rochester Philharmonic—along with what she called “a wonderful and nurturing section” of Mark Kellogg (principal), David Richey (bass), and Jeff Anderson (tuba)—as full of good memories. The best among them was meeting and dating the orchestra’s associate principal horn player, Dietrich Hemann. Their relationship began shortly before Megumi auditioned for the principal trombone position in the Milwaukee Symphony in 2002. Emory Remington connections abounded at that audition. Milwaukee Symphony trombonist Gary Greenhoe—who had studied with Remington at Eastman—told his friend, Ralph Sauer, another Remington student who at that time was principal trombonist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, that the MSO “was really hoping to find someone who played in the style of the teaching of Emory Remington.” James DeSano, also a Remington student, had schooled Megumi well in Remington’s emphasis on a focused sound, singing style, and sensitivity. Megumi recalls that the orchestra’s music director, Andreas Delfs, told her that her playing on Bruckner Symphony 7—with her 88-H in hand—“sealed the deal.”<sup>4</sup> Megumi went off to her new orchestra in Wisconsin but after two years, Dietrich told her that he was ready to quit playing in Rochester; he wanted to move to Milwaukee to marry her. And married they were, on August 14, 2004. After several years of freelancing in the Milwaukee and Chicago areas, Dietrich won the second horn position in the Milwaukee Symphony. “What a blessing!” Megumi remembered. “It was one of the most amazing things that happened to us. We still can’t believe how fortunate we are to twice be in the same orchestra together.”

The Milwaukee Symphony low brass section has undergone many changes since Megumi joined the orchestra. For her first seasons, the other members of her section were Gary Greenhoe (assistant principal; Megumi now plays a Greenhoe GC4-1R trombone), Richard Kimball (bass) and Alan Baer (tuba). Randy Montgomery joined on tuba when Alan Baer went to the New York Philharmonic, and the section now includes Kirk Ferguson (assistant principal), John Thevenet (bass) and—since fall 2020—Robert Black (tuba).

Megumi’s life has been a non-stop, white-knuckle ride where, in her words, “The plate is always full and there is never a dull moment.” Between 2002 and 2004, she recorded three trombone solo recordings. The first was *Amazing Grace*, released by JVC (Japan Victor Company, VICC-60316).



Megumi's solo recordings



A JVC producer asked Megumi if she would be interested in making a compact disc of gospel music, “Of course!” she said. “That happened to be one of the first things on my TO DO list as a trombone player. Ever since I recovered from my injury, it had been my dream to make a sacred CD. That’s how I grew up: in church, playing hymns and gospel music.” The album includes collaborations with the Rochester Community Gospel Choir—a group she first heard while a student in Cleveland when they performed for a Martin Luther King Day concert—and pianist Bruce Stark. *Amazing Grace* is joyful and exuberant, full of spirituals and multiple Megumis playing overdubbed arrangements of “We Shall Overcome” and “Nearer My God to Thee.” And in a special, very personal collaboration, her mother, Elizabeth, accompanies Megumi on “How Great Thou Art.”

*Amazing Grace* was the first time Megumi worked with pianist and composer Bruce Stark; he became one of her most prolific collaborators. Theirs is a friendship born of similarities. “He is an American from California,” she says, “but went to Japan and married a Japanese girl. His kids are a mix just like me, so we have a lot in common. I love his music.”

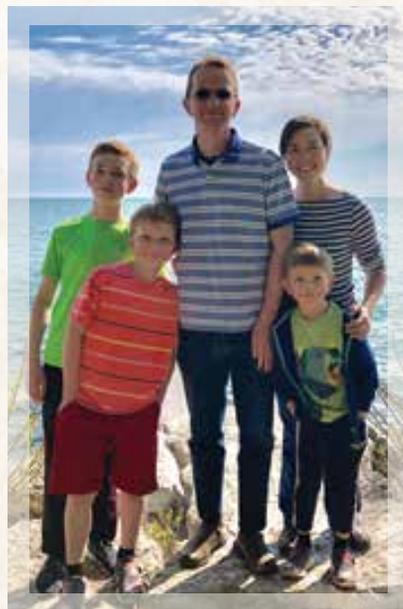
Stark has written many pieces for Megumi, including several which appear on *Amazing Grace*. His *Sketches of Japan* will be premiered at the 2021 International Trombone Festival at Columbus State University. Megumi has also championed music composed for her by Amy Riebs Mills, who has written what has become one of Megumi’s signature pieces, *Red Dragonfly*, as well as *Golden* which will also be premiered at the 2021 ITF. “Amy is a very sensitive composer,” Megumi says, “and she is always open to hearing what I am looking for in a piece.”

A second solo recording followed in 2003, *Gloria* (Albany Records Troy 694), which features classical sacred music accompanied by organist Peter Dubois and a string quartet. The album is a superb vehicle to showcase Megumi’s exceptionally expressive playing, including a moving performance of the aria, *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* (Have mercy, oh my God) from J. S.

Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*. And while her characteristic modesty leads her to blush a little when asked about her 2004 recording of tunes from the great American songbook, *Mona Lisa* (JVC, VICC-60408), the truth is that Megumi is more than simply comfortable and credible as a jazz ballad player and even playing up tempo standards like “Fly Me to the Moon”—she makes the songs come alive with classy style and her signature beautiful sound and vibrato. The accompanying jazz combo, led by Bruce Stark on piano, provides much more than just a sympathetic accompaniment. It is obvious that the collaboration is a special one, full of vibrancy, humor, and sensitivity.

But as important as the trombone is to Megumi, her life has great balance. She and Dietrich have three boys, Hans, Max, and Lukas, all of whom play piano and other instruments (violin, viola, and trombone). “Our music room is always

in high demand,” Megumi says. Their children experience some of the duality of identity that Megumi herself faces with her multi-ethnic DNA. “Growing up in Japan,” she says, “I was always different looking from everyone else. When I’m in Japan, people think I’m American because of the way I look, and when I’m in the United States, most people think I’m Japanese because of my name. My inside is a mix.” And so it is with their children. At home in Milwaukee, her family speaks Japanese, and her boys always greet her eagerly when she comes home with favorite foods from the Japanese market.



Dietrich and Megumi Hemann with their sons, Hans, Max, and Lukas (2019)



Megumi and her boys at home (2013)

Megumi and Dietrich are also active in the music ministry of their church, Milwaukee Covenant Church, and, following in the footsteps of her mother, she loves gardening. In 2013, her flower garden was a showcase on the Shorewood (Wisconsin) Garden Tour. “I consider my flower garden a museum of beautiful creations for everyone to enjoy; it just lifts your spirits up.” Her garden, “cheers up the passing people especially after the long winter in Wisconsin.” In a sense, her gardening harkens back to her childhood and her love of Japanese cherry tree blossoms—*sakura*. “The *sakura* flowers bloom for only a short time, but they bring great joy to people who see them,” she told me. The *sakura* is “a reminder for me of how our life here is short, but we can bloom beautifully and bring joy to the people around us for the time we have on earth.”

To know Megumi Kanda is to know one who delights in bringing joy to others. When I asked her to describe herself in five words, she needed six: happy, optimistic, empathetic, determined, hard working. Whether coaching young players in Carnegie Hall’s National Youth Orchestra and National Youth Orchestra 2, as the author of *The One Hundred: Essential Works for the Orchestral Tenor Trombonist* (Encore Music Publications), giving recitals and masterclasses around the world, inspiring people with her collaborations through Duke Divinity School’s Duke Initiatives for Theology and the Arts (DITA), or encouraging trombonists with her openness about her injuries and her recovery from them (in addition to her embouchure injury while studying in Cleveland, several years ago she developed a brass allergy that severely affected her playing until she switched to a Lexan mouthpiece rim), anyone whose life intersects with hers comes away grateful for the encounter. The challenges she faced early in her career and how she overcame them—“I am living and still playing by the grace of God”—have given her a spirit of engagement and caring that changes others. When I asked her about this, she said:



Douglas Yeo, Megumi, and James Kraft (National Symphony Orchestra, retired). Duke Initiatives for Theology and the Arts, Durham, North Carolina (2017)

If there is anyone that feels like an underdog in any way, I hope I can be an encouragement for them through the way I have lived. I speak of underdog in a broad sense. One can face issues relating to gender, economic status, race, physical or mental trouble, or anything that causes you any challenges. Challenges don’t have to limit you. They can make you into a stronger, kinder, and humbler person, and they give you more chances to encourage others.

As the recipient of the 2020 ITA Award, Megumi Kanda deservedly adds our Association’s highest honor to her long resume. None of us get to write our own legacy, but when I asked Megumi how, years from now, she would like to look back at the life she has lived, she said, without hesitation, “First and foremost, as a loving wife and mother. My family is most important to me.” To this she added, “As a trombone player, I hope to be remembered as someone who spoke through music, helped by providing useful study materials and ideas for students, and helped expand and elevate the repertoire written for the trombone.” As one who struggled early in her life with the burden of the expectations of others, she learned and embodies the lesson expressed in what has come to be her favorite verse from the Bible, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:34)

Yet this is not the time for too much reflection; there is much ahead for Megumi Kanda in her busy, multitasking life. She has just released a new method book, *Trombone Unlimited* (Encore Music Publishers), in which, “I tried to include everything I wish I had available to me as a student in one place, approaching all manner of studies in a musical way.”



Excerpt from a feature article about Megumi in AGORA, the flight magazine of Japan Airlines (2011)



Premieres of new solo works are being scheduled in her busy performance calendar. Last year she was elected 2nd Vice President of the ITA and is also the new co-editor of the ITA *Journal's* Orchestral Sectional column. And along with all of her Milwaukee Symphony colleagues, she looks forward to moving into the orchestra's new home soon, the Bradley Symphony Center in downtown Milwaukee. Most of all, she relishes “the change of pace of being a mom and a musician” which “helps keep variety in life and keeps both roles very fresh.” Megumi understands that a life well-lived is a life lived in balance with faith, family, and career. This exceptional woman who has her feet and DNA firmly in two cultures at the same time—East and West—also reminds us that to those to whom much has been given, there is much to return:

I stand on the ground that all the people who loved and cared for me have prepared for me. I plan to pay forward what they did for me to future generations.

This is Megumi Kanda. Wife, mother, trombonist, dual-citizen, teacher, role model, encourager, and our 2020 ITA Award recipient. Meg. Megumi. Grace. Amazing Grace.

#### NOTES

- 1 This article came together as the result of numerous conversations between Megumi Kanda and the author since 2017 including a lengthy interview on March 13, 2020, and several follow-up emails and conversations. Sumio Miwa's comments came in an email message of March 4, 2020. James DeSano's comments came in a phone interview with the author on April 27, 2020. Unless otherwise noted, all photos were supplied by Megumi Kanda, and she drew the traditional Japanese calligraphy rendering of her name.
- 2 For a profile of Rev. Eisuke Kanda, see “New Beginnings in Japan,” *Come & Listen: a chronicle of the DNA [Disciple Nations Alliance] global movement*. June 17, 2010, <https://dnaglobalnews.wordpress.com/2010/06/17/exciting-developments-in-japan/>. See also the Friends With the Voiceless website [in Japanese], [www.karashi.net](http://www.karashi.net).
- 3 For more information about Bill Pearce, see Douglas Yeo, “To God Be the Glory: Bill Pearce and Musical Excellence.” May 22, 2010, [www.yeodoug.com/articles/bill\\_pearce/bill\\_pearce\\_tribute.html](http://www.yeodoug.com/articles/bill_pearce/bill_pearce_tribute.html).
- 4 For Megumi Kanda's biography page on the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra website, see, [www.mso.org/about/orchestra/musician\\_detail/megumi-kanda/](http://www.mso.org/about/orchestra/musician_detail/megumi-kanda/).

*Douglas Yeo (yeodoug.com and thelasttrombone.com) and Megumi Kanda have been friends for many years, and their collaborations include working together at the Masterworks Festival, the 2017 International Trombone Festival, and Duke Initiatives for Theology and the Arts. In 2020, they gave a joint recital and masterclass for the St. Louis Low Brass Collective. Douglas Yeo was bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony from 1985–2012 and professor of trombone at Arizona State University from 2012–2016. Recipient of the International Trombone Association's 2014 ITA Award, he is currently lecturer of trombone at Wheaton College (Illinois).*