



The Ark Nova is a futuristic addition to the rural landscape of Tohoku. **Left** a helium-filled balloon above the stage helps control the acoustics of the space

Into the ark

An inflatable concert hall tours north-east Japan, bringing musical succour to areas laid waste by the 2011 tsunami. By **Danielle Demetriou**. Photographs by **Noriko Takasugi**

The doors will open soon and the concert will begin. There are perhaps 500 people outside, chattering politely as bustling ushers hand out programmes. Out of sight, a handful of classical musicians are playing a cacophony of sounds on their stringed instruments – a snatch of Brahms, a smooth arpeggio, a violin being tuned. So far, so predictable – yet there are several major deviations from the norm. For the music-loving audience is gathered not within the confines of a metropolitan opera house. Instead they are standing on top of a windswept hill in rural Japan overlooking the ocean. And in front of them, hijacking the bucolic landscape, is a vast balloon-like inflatable – curved in form and as purple as a mulberry – inside which the concert is about to begin.

Welcome to Ark Nova, the world's first inflatable concert hall, designed by the British sculptor Anish Kapoor and the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki in order to tour north-east Japan over the next three years.

There have been many changes to Japan's once-celebrated Tohoku landscape of rice fields and mountains since March 11 2011 – a date etched into the psyche of the nation. It was on this day at precisely 2.46pm that a magnitude-nine earthquake rattled Japan before unleashing a tsunami



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of biblical proportions, with waves hitting 131ft along the Pacific coastline. The devastation was unnervingly well documented on mobile phone footage and social-media snaps: entire homes swept away, swaths of city disappearing and about 20,000 lives lost as the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl unfolded.

Fast-forward more than two and a half years, and much of the rubble may be cleared but the scars remain: 300,000 people are still in temporary accommodation; suicide rates are high; and Fukushima's nuclear crisis is raging on.

This, its creators are hoping, is where Ark Nova steps in. The project is the brainchild of Michael Haefliger – the artistic and executive director of the annual Lucerne Festival in Switzerland, which began in 1938 and brings together the world's most talented classical musicians – and the Japanese impresario Masahide Kajimoto.

According to Haefliger, the goal is simple: now that the initial rush for aid – emergency housing, food, debris-clearing – has passed, focus can shift to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of those living in the shadow of the disaster.

And the best way to lift spirits and restore hope for the future? By revitalising the community through world-class music, art and culture. As a result, Ark Nova's purple form – which was created free by Kapoor and Isozaki – will be an increasingly common sight on the Tohoku landscape. The distinctive structure will be home to an annual music festival held across the region, with performers ranging from traditional folk dancers and children from local schools to world-famous Lucerne Festival musicians and Japanese artists. Ark Nova made its debut this autumn with a two-week festival in Matsushima, a small coastal town famed for its beautiful bay scattered with pine tree islands.

It is here on a hilltop overlooking the bay that 10 workers unpack Ark Nova from a crate measuring only three metres cubed, then inflate it within an hour by connecting it to a series of fans via ducts attached the structure's air lock.

The futuristic walk-through sculpture stands out like a sore thumb against its pastoral background,



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stretching 118ft by 95ft on the ground and 59ft high. Smooth and round, the shell is made from a single membrane of PVC-coated polyester less than a quarter of an inch thick, and loosely resembles an oversized doughnut, aubergine or adzuki bean (depending on whom you ask).

A spiralling interior arm appears from the inside, or a tunnel-like hole from the outside through which a patch of sky can be seen – where visitors gather for photographs. Inaugural performers include the Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel and the prodigious father and son Wolfram and Raphael Christ playing viola and violin in a Lucerne Festival sextet. The main stars, however, are those perhaps hit hardest: the local children. The festival founders created the Tohoku Youth Orchestra, comprising more than 280 children from seven schools across the region selected by their teachers to take part in workshops conducted by world-famous musicians on Ark Nova's stage.

Above left the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto. **Above** the audience gathers outside the Ark. **Below** the Lucerne Festival sextet in rehearsal

Sipping coffee beside a Nescafé truck parked



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incongruously in front of Ark Nova, Michael Haefliger inhales with relief as he surveys the realisation of his dream. 'It's great to see it. It has been a long two years – it feels more like 10,' he says. 'This is basically a social art project. It brings high art to an area that has suffered a big disaster. We want the art to interact with the region, so there are workshops as well as performances.'

It was on March 12 2011 – one day after the tsunami – that Haefliger rang his musical collaborator and friend Kajimoto in Japan, to talk about how they could help. He admits, 'At first people were sceptical. What is this crazy idea, they said, an inflatable for disasters? There were moments I wondered whether we would pull it off. But people here are looking for something to pull themselves out of the negative loop. Something to help them develop new hopes.' Kajimoto agrees. 'Some people said why not send pianos instead? But this is more precious. Musicians coming to play music is something that money cannot buy. It's a fantastic gift and will help people realise they are not alone.'

Officially owned by the Lucerne Festival, Ark Nova is also supported by several high-profile sponsors, including the Swiss companies UBS and Nestlé as well as Japan's Takeda Pharmaceuticals and the advertisers Dentsu.

The sculpture is stamped with Kapoor's signature aesthetic and is reminiscent of his *Leviathan*, an inflatable made of the same purple material, which was exhibited in Paris's Grand Palais shortly after the 2011 disaster. Kapoor, who became involved in the project at the request of Isozaki, described via email from London how they managed to bring Ark Nova to life. 'I worked in close collaboration with Arata Isozaki's studio in Tokyo, and with Aerotrope, a Brighton-based engineering firm with which I have worked closely on many projects,' he explained. 'Aerotrope led the design from the structural perspective, and Mr Isozaki's team made and delivered Ark Nova.'

Safety issues were key: deflation takes longer than inflation, to ensure safe evacuation, while ventilation is controlled by thermal laws, with two revolving doors balancing air pressure. Sound



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quality was another challenge, with music initially reverberating for a church-like eight seconds – eventually cut to three by a white helium-filled balloon above the stage and angular sound boards behind the musicians.

The finished structure is 'perfect', according to Isozaki (famed for such structures as Kyoto Concert Hall and Barcelona's Olympic Stadium), who swapped countless sketches over Skype with Kapoor as the project took form. 'I've always enjoyed working on cultural projects,' he says. 'It was interesting to watch it being inflated. I was surprised it inflated so quickly.'

On the final windswept weekend, visitors of all ages travelled across the Tohoku region to catch a glimpse of the oversized purple structure and attend one of the concerts. With the goal of making Ark Nova as accessible as possible to local residents, the tickets range from ¥2,000 to ¥5,000 (£12.50-31.50), while a number of performances, including children's workshops, are free of charge.

Above left Yoshihide Otomo leads a workshop for children. **Above** the Ark at nightfall. **Below** the audience is seated on cedar benches



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Among the visitors is kimono-wearing Hisami Watanabe, 50, who works for a media company and travelled for an hour from her home in Sendai – a Tohoku city hit hard by the disaster – with two friends. ‘We enjoy classical music and were very excited to see it,’ she says. ‘I can’t imagine what the music will sound like.’

Inside, daylight bathes the membrane in a glowing red, and the scent of cedar fills the air, from the neat rows of benches accommodating the 500-strong audience – hand-crafted relics of tsunami-damaged trees retrieved from Matsushima’s famous temple Zuigan-ji.

When the performances start, the sound is warm and soft-edged, not as sharp as within a conventional concert hall, but perfectly complementing the artwork’s organic, cocooning curves – with the elements providing unexpected accompaniments (the membrane quivering in sudden winds perfectly matches the climactic second movement of Brahms No 1 in B-flat major).

A highlight is undoubtedly Ryuichi Sakamoto, who conducts a stage full of enthusiastic wind-instrument-toting schoolchildren from the Tohoku Youth Orchestra as they perform some of his best-known works, including the theme tune of the Japanese television series *Yae no Sakura* and the soundtrack of the 1983 film *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*. He later takes part in an improvisation workshop with other children from the orchestra, conducted by the Japanese musician Yoshihide Otomo, before closing the festival on Sunday evening with a solo piano performance.

Speaking between performances Sakamoto says, ‘Some parts of Tohoku are pretty much recovered, but in other parts, almost nothing is done. This project will be a big help for these children. Many of them are holding on to something very heavy inside them, something not yet healed. Music really helps them to open up their feelings.’

It is the schoolchildren who emerge as the event’s biggest stars. Among them is Rena Tamate, a bubbly 14-year-old percussionist who attends a local school 30 minutes away by bus from Ark Nova. ‘We heard about this through our teacher and it’s been really fun,’ she says. ‘We received the music two months ago and we’ve been practising ever since.’

The conversation switches to March 11, and the children compare how close the tsunami came to each of their homes. ‘After the earthquake we were scared,’ Tamate adds. ‘I couldn’t be alone. I cried a lot. Last year I joined an orchestra, and playing music together really helped. It made me feel more energetic, connected, stronger.’

Takashi Hagiwara, a music teacher at Soma Higashi High School – 30 miles from Fukushima – adds, ‘Everyone was affected in some way. Five pupils died and many lost parents or siblings. But children are strong. They like things to carry on and have a sense of normality. So this event has been really good for them.’

The event is a moment of pride for the 16,000-strong population of Matsushima, the town that was chosen as the inaugural setting, not only because it is one of Japan’s best-loved beauty spots but also because it escaped relatively lightly in the tsunami. The pine islands scattered across the bay broke the tsunami so that it hit only the first floors of the buildings (the death toll was 16), unlike



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neighbouring areas such as Rikuzentakata, where nearly 2,000 died and swaths of the city have yet to be rebuilt. The mayor, Takeo Ohashi, says, ‘Matsushima is a very small town. Most people have not had the chance to see this kind of world-standard art, culture and design.’

Between performances on Sunday, tourists pile along the main street in autumn sunshine, past Zuigan-ji temple and kiosks selling giant grilled oysters, a local speciality. Nearby Naojiro Motomura, an 86-year-old craftsman, pauses from making a wooden doll and looks blank when Ark Nova is mentioned – before emitting a long ‘aaah’ when told it is the purple thing on the hill. ‘I wondered what that was,’ he says. He has painstakingly rebuilt his workshop and home after losing everything in the tsunami. But he perhaps best sums up the sentiment of the region when he adds, ‘Whatever it is, if it brings in more people, then it’s very welcome to stay.’

Above the sextet in performance. **Below** Michael Haefliger, Arata Isozaki and Masahide Kajimoto, the creative forces behind the Ark Nova project

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