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# Sonic mix blooms under the boughs of the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival

by Alexander Varty on March 27th, 2019 at 2:58 PM



Spring arrives in a blaze of pink for the annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival. **LINDA POOLE**

*Hanami*, or cherry-blossom viewing, is a Japanese tradition, but it's been picked up in a big way here in Vancouver. And Vancouver being what it is, our local celebrations have taken on a decidedly multicultural aspect—*mutant*, one might even say.

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Emblematic of the local approach is Kim Noriko Kobayashi, a Japanese-Canadian musician whose NoriNori & Kage duo will be one of the featured acts at the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival's Cherry Jam downtown concert next Thursday (April 4). Yes, she plays the *shamisen*—a Japanese descendant of the *sanxian*, a Chinese lute—and yes, she's teaming up with taiko drummer Eileen Kage, another exponent of a uniquely Japanese art form. But *shamisen* and *taiko* are rarely, if ever, heard together on the Japanese archipelago, and the two performers will be putting a distinctly West Coast spin on the combination.

Even, it seems, when they're playing one of the most beloved songs in the Japanese folk-music canon.

As Kobayashi explains from her North Delta home, NoriNori & Kage will be playing the unofficial anthem of cherry-blossom season, "Sakura", at Cherry Jam. But you'll never have heard it like this.

"I've gone ahead and composed 'Sakura Variations', which I'm looking to debut at the Cherry Jam, just to spice things up," she says. "Like, there's a hard-rock version of 'Sakura', and then it goes into a kind of bluesy or jazzy version, and then a kind of a samba version, a little bit of punk rock. So I've had fun with 'Sakura' this year."



The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival casts new light on a Japanese tradition. **LUKASZ SZCZEPANSKI**

MNGWA's Japanese connection is a little harder to unearth, possibly even nonexistent. The East Van band is made up of five Russians, a Mexican, and a Canadian, and specializes in *chicha*, a rocked-up Peruvian version of Latin-American *cumbia* (with, of course, some Eastern European melodies thrown in). But the group's cross-cultural and celebratory sound is a perfect fit for Cherry Jam, and bassist Nick Lagasse says he's going to lobby hard to include its one seasonally appropriate number, "((sun))", in MNGWA's set.

"That song is insane. It mixes kind of prog-Latin music with a bit of bhangra, and then it has the [Vietnamese] *dan bao* over top of it," the Ottawa-born Lagasse says, laughing. "It's about the power and the beauty of the sun, but also about how the sun has the power to give life and take it away. It's our 'Stairway to Heaven', basically. It just throws so many styles into one song, but it's a good representation of what we can do."

Sonic and cultural diversity aren't the only Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival hallmarks: the nearly monthlong event embraces a wide variety of art forms and genres, as can be seen in textile artist Linda Coe's *Haiku Quilt*, the de facto centerpiece of the festival's Sakura Days events, at VanDusen Garden on April 13 and 14. Incorporating the five poems that won the 2018 edition of the festival's Haiku Invitational competition, it will also allow the public to have their own spontaneous, 17-syllable meditations on spring stitched into the fabric.



The Sakura Days events of this year's Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival will take place at VanDusen Garden. **JONATHAN NICOMEDES**

"I wanted to make it as engaging and colourful and inviting as possible," says Coe from her East Van home, adding that the festival as a whole is also a kind of quilt, composed as it is of so many diverse cultural options.

"Regardless of how you connect to this particular festival, whether it's through being Japanese or knowing Japanese or whatever, the fact is that the trees are here, and they're beautiful," she says. "And they do kind of welcome spring; they welcome the new season in. It's a seasonal rebirth. And I know that's a bit trite, but they do make us feel good after the dreary winter months!"

**The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival takes place at a variety of Vancouver locations from Thursday (April 4) to April 28. For a full schedule, visit the festival's [website](#).**