

Ayaka Hirahara, Takehiro Ueyama, and Futago Onikenbai to Perform at the National Cherry Blossom Festival Opening !

The Japan Foundation (JF) will send three groups of artists active in Japan and overseas to perform at the National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

At the opening ceremony, Ayaka Hirahara, known for her hit song featuring Japanese lyrics set to the classical masterpiece "Jupiter," will deliver a special vocal performance.

There will also be a performance by Futago Onikenbai, who preserve a traditional performing art from Kitakami and Oshu cities in Iwate Prefecture called Onikenbai, which is recognized as one of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage "Furyu-odori" dances.

In addition, a stage performance will be presented which is directed and choreographed by internationally acclaimed choreographer Takehiro Ueyama. Through these diverse Japanese stage performances, we hope to promote a better understanding of Japan in the United States and increase interest in a wide range of Japanese cultural genres.



National Cherry Blossom Festival Opening Performance

Event Schedule: Saturday, March 21, 2026 from 5:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. (EDT)

Venue: DAR Constitution Hall

Performers: Ayaka Hirahara, Takehiro Ueyama (Direction and Choreography), Futago Onikenbai and others

Organizer: National Cherry Blossom Festival, Inc.

Co-presenter: The Japan Foundation

Futago Onikenbai Performance

Event Schedule: Thursday, March 19, 2026 at 6:00 P.M. (EDT)

Venue: The Trump Kennedy Center (Millennium Stage)

Organizer: The Japan Foundation

Co-organizer: The Trump Kennedy Center, Embassy of Japan in the United States of America

Cooperation: National Cherry Blossom Festival, Inc., Futago Onikenbai

Press inquiries:

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Ayaka Hirahara Performance

Event Schedule: Friday, March 20, 2026 at 7:00 P.M. (EDT)

Venue: Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art (Meyer Auditorium)

Organizer: The Japan Foundation, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art

Co-presenter: Embassy of Japan in the United States of America

Cooperation: National Cherry Blossom Festival, Inc., Office MAMA.

【Artist Profiles】

Ayaka HIRAHARA



Debuted in 2003 with "Jupiter." Received high acclaim and numerous awards as a singer, including the Japan Record Awards for Artist Award and the Japan Gold Disc Award while also being active in diverse fields such as musicals, voice acting, dramas, and movie dubbing.

In 2015, she established the 'Ayaka Hirahara Jupiter Fund' to contribute to society and provide various forms of support through music. She performed the national anthem at the opening match of Rugby World Cup 2019.

Her musical theater credits include Love Never Dies, Beautiful, Mary Poppins, Fist of the North Star: Hokuto no Ken, and Moulin Rouge! The Musical.

"Ayaka Hirahara Concert Tour 2024-2025 ~The Swinging Classics!~" was co-directed and produced with Masataka Matsutoya. She continues her concert tours annually.

Her latest single is the theme song for the 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo Pavilion "PASONA NATUREVERSE": "Thank You, Life / To the Future of 8 Billion."

Since her debut, she has released 35 singles, 12 digital singles, 29 albums (including cover albums and best-of compilations), 15 DVDs, and 7 Blu-rays.

Takehiro Ueyama



A native of Tokyo, Take Ueyama moved to the United States in 1991 to study dance at The Juilliard School in New York City. Upon graduation, he was invited to join the Paul Taylor Dance Company, touring internationally for eight years. He also performed extensively with Kazuko Hirabayashi Dance Theatre. In 2003, Take made his choreographic debut with "Tsubasa," presented at SUNY New Paltz with fellow Taylor dancers. Two years later, he founded TAKE Dance, a company known for its powerful athleticism and evocative blend of Eastern and Western aesthetics. Drawing on his Japanese heritage and a deep reverence for nature and humanity, Take's work explores themes of beauty, resilience, compassion, and the duality of light and darkness

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in the human experience.

His choreography has been presented by major institutions and festivals including The Kennedy Center, The Joyce Theater, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Central Park SummerStage, PS/21 Chatham, The Judson Memorial Church, Winspear Opera House in Dallas, Harris Theater Chicago, Spring to Dance Festival in St. Louis, and Washington D.C.'s National Cherry Blossom Festival, among others.

His work has been commissioned and performed by companies and schools such as Newport Contemporary Ballet, BalletX, Columbia Ballet Collaborative, Dallas Black Dance Theatre, ArcDanz, The Juilliard School, The Ailey School, UW-Madison, and SMU Meadows School of the Arts.

Take has received international recognition for his choreography. "Sakura Sakura" was a prizewinner at the International Modern Dance Choreographic Competition in Burgos, Spain. He was one of four choreographers selected for the 2006 "Free to Rep" program at Florida State University's MANCC and became the first choreographer to receive the S&R Foundation's Washington Award in 2010. Other honors include the 2015 Jadin Wong Award for Emerging Asian American Choreographer (Asian American Arts Alliance), a 2022 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, the 2023 Danse Mirage Foundation Choreography Grant for Bamboo Dreams, and the 2025 Gross Family Prize from the Charles and Joan Gross Family Foundation.

Futago Onikenbai



Futago Onikenbai is a traditional Japanese performing arts group from Iwate Prefecture, located in the Tohoku region of Japan. The group performs Onikenbai, a Buddhist ritual dance with roots dating back over 1,200 years. The name Onikenbai, meaning "Demon Sword Dance," comes from the demon-like masks worn by performers—symbolic representations of Buddhist deities. The repertoire includes sword dances as well as performances using fans, bare hands, and

acrobatic movement, with both solo and group formations and ceremonial chanting.

One of 13 Onikenbai troupes in Kitakami, Futago Onikenbai proudly carries on this sacred tradition. Celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, the group is dedicated to rigorous training and the preservation of this powerful, elegant, and dynamic art form.

The Japan Foundation

The Japan Foundation is an independent administrative institution whose mission is "Cultivating friendship and ties between Japan and the world." Through culture, language, and dialogue, the Japan Foundation creates global opportunities to foster friendship, trust, and mutual understanding.

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The Japan Foundation dispatches or provides aid for sending out performance groups in cooperation with local related organizations for the introduction of Japanese stage and performing arts overseas.

For more details, please visit the official website:

<https://www.jpf.go.jp/1/project/culture/perform/oversea/2025.html>



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