

Opera Culture in Japan: Part 2 (Last)

1st Opera Performance in Japan & Its Consequences

By Marumoto Takashi

It is said that the first opera performance in Japan was that of *“Orpheus”* by Gluck held in 1903 at the Tokyo Music College (the present Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music). To be exact, it was the “first” full-length Japanese performance. According to recent research, Dutch residents in Nagasaki had already presented a comical opera at the beginning of the 19th century at *Dejima*, an artificial island that served as their trading post. After Japan ended its isolationist policy, opera performances were for a long time monopolized by foreigners. Amateurs who lived in Japan and professional singers from abroad were active at such theaters as located at the settlement in the major trading port town Yokohama. They mostly presented, however, popular light operas. Even a “real” opera was merely an extract from the work. In the case of the alleged “first” opera in Japan, Gounod’s *“Faust”* shown in 1894, only the study-scene of Act I was played, and that by foreign diplomats.

The production of *“Orpheus”* was, to be sure, an imperfect one too because it lacked orchestral music, which had to be replaced by a piano accompaniment. And the conductor was a Frenchman. Yet the solo and choral singers consisted wholly of students of the school, including graduates; more drive to carry out this project derived from the Japanese reality. It was truly astonishing that not only the level of musical technique but also desire for opera increased so rapidly in a brief period, since the Japanese had become acquainted with European music and civilization. A broad range of “dramas” that unfolded over the performance were so epoch-making that they possibly indicated the future development of Japan’s opera culture.

Wagner: Starting Point in Japan

Shortly before the performance, a professor of German literature at Tokyo Imperial University organized a Wagner association, which planned, in cooperation with a similar group of the music college, to translate and stage a Wagnerian opera, *“Tanhäuser.”*

But it had to be changed for the “simpler” work of Gluck when the Wagner turned out to be still too difficult for the real singers. In any case, a Wagner fever motivated this event. It was no wonder that Wagner was accepted so enthusiastically in Japan at that time, because the nation was under such a strong German influence, as can be seen from its constitution modeled after the Prussian. It is worthy of special mention that Wagner, who formed a peak in the long history of opera more than 200 years after its birth was the starting point of the real acceptance of opera in Japan.

Japanese original works, then, began to appear. This movement was indeed also related to the Wagnerism. *“Eternal Darkness”* of 1906 was one of them. It was written by Togi Tetteki (Photo 1), who was the composer of *“Northwest of Capital,”* which is known even now as a most-famous university song. Tsubouchi Shoyo, a renowned novelist and the translator of the complete works of Shakespeare, wrote its lyrics after having published his Wagner-like

theoretical book *“Neo-Musikdrama”* two years before. The story of the opera was derived from the Japanese myth of *Amaterasu Omikami*, a “Sun Goddess confined to the Celestial Rock Cave,” which followed Wagner’s examples of seeking materials for his works in Germanic mythology. Musically, it was a mixture of melodies of *gagaku*, ancient Japanese court music, and Wagnerian tunes with some “leitmotivs.”

It was marvelous that a group of Japanese native

Photo: Possessed by the Theatre Museum, Waseda University



Togi Tetteki (1869-1925): An actor and musician, he worked at the Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency. He is known as the composer of Waseda University’s famous school song.

operas was established at such an early stage in the reception of opera from the West. Nevertheless, it was linked closely to the uplifting fighting spirit in the age of the Russo-Japanese War. And from the beginning, the interest in opera was tied up more to such thoughts as the ideal of the creation of *"Musikdrama,"* rooted in nationalism, than to a yearning for enjoying music. It might have been the reason why the first opera and the series of subsequent ones could neither trigger a constant opera staging in the following years nor succeed in getting an opera culture to take root in Japanese society. In the end, they quickly deteriorated and were taken over by amusing light works, such as the *"Asakusa Opera,"* which prospered until the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923; but these did not leave a significant influence either.

■ Opera Boom: Of Great Interest

Concerning the first performance of opera in Japan, there was another important factor that might have characterized decisively the history of its opera culture. Five years after this performance, a plan to repeat it with an orchestra accompaniment surfaced. But it was interrupted by an intervention from the Ministry of Education for moral reasons: "It is not desirable to present love stories at a school late in the evening, which involves the mixing of boys with girls." This decision is the outcome of the climate of the time, when actors and singers, already an honorable vocation in Europe, remained here still being regarded as disreputable. And yet, at the music college, male-female relationships were far more "advanced" than in general. This fact might have caused "good citizens" to feel uneasiness and created the image of opera as being immoral.

A further five years later, the *"Takarazuka Opera"* was founded; it started out as an all-girls revue company and emphasized the motto "pure, proper, beautiful" for the sake of its stable existence. (Photo 2) At the music college, on the other hand, opera performances were forced to be suspended until Verdi's *"La Traviata"* was performed in 1956. It had long been the leading, and of the few educational institutes for music in Japan, the only national one.

We can easily conceive how much effect its indifference to opera for nearly 50 years had on the coming process of Japan's operatic history.

In this country, opera, or theater in general, has long been something the authorities did not welcome. In the early years of modernization, there was indeed a movement to heighten theater culture to an international level. One of the excellent results was the completion of the Royal Theater in 1911 as the first Western-style playhouse where operas also could be brought to the stage. It was established finally, however, as a commercial facility. In this process, there was little support for the idea to follow the examples of European countries to aid theater by national subsidization, though the movement was initiated chiefly by prominent statesmen. The performance of *"Orpheus"* could be realized because of a private contribution.

Needless to say, in the meantime, every effort has been made to spread opera. Yet it was at most 20 years ago that the existence of an opera culture began to be widely recognized in Japan. In 1997, at last, the first National Opera was founded. As mentioned in the last issue, the social conditions are now so favorable for operatic products that we can enjoy them considerably, if we have only to want it. To think of Japan's history of opera, which has spanned only a little more than 100 years with many twists and turns, I feel the recent opera boom, which may seem superficial, is actually of great interest. **JS**

Photo: Kyodo News



A scene from the musical *"EXCALIBUR -Gorgeous Knights-"* featuring two lead members Shizuki Asato (left) and Hanafusa Mari of the all-female Takarazuka Revue Company

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