

# Awareness of a Mother Tongue

By Samejima Yumiko

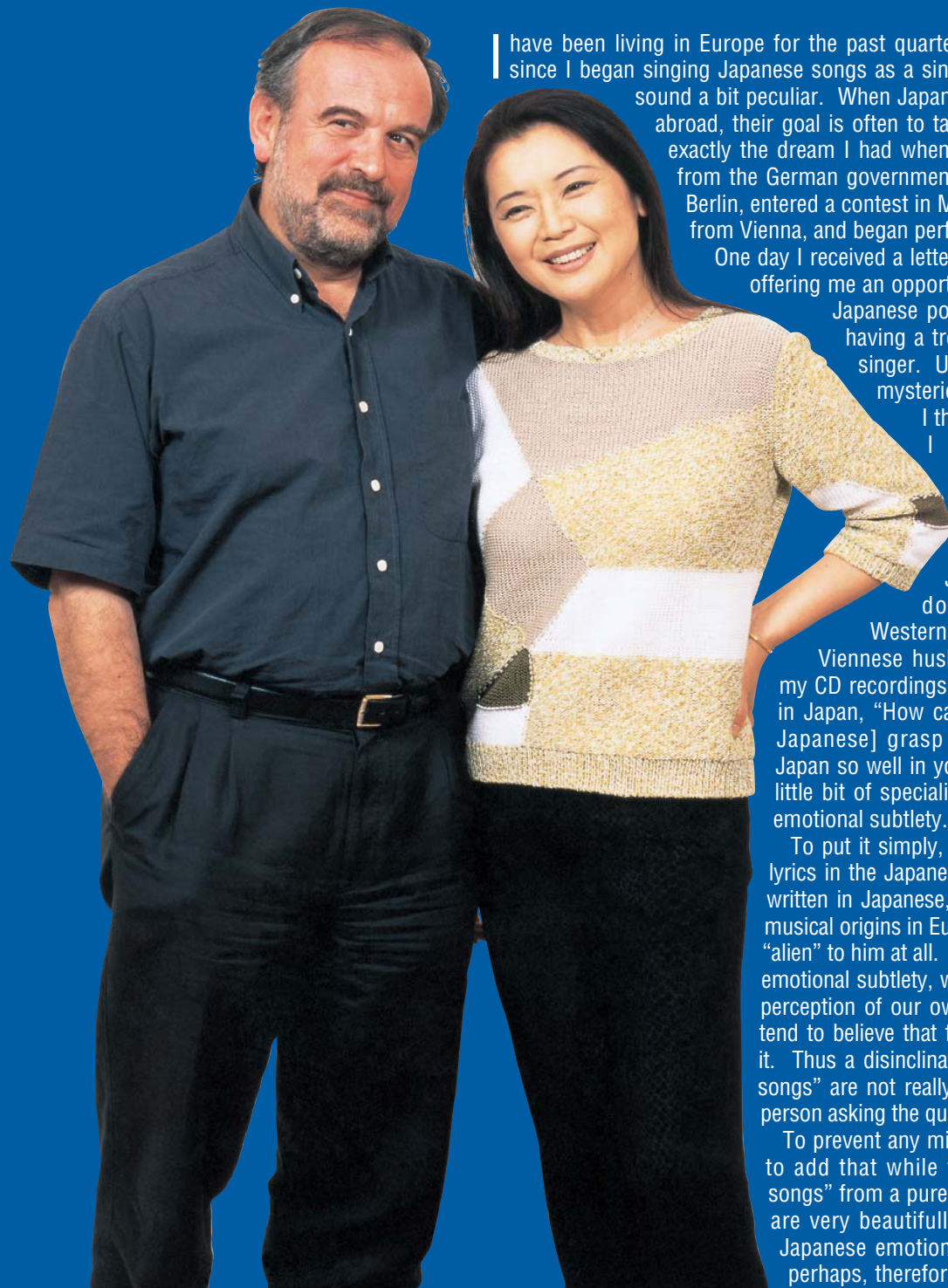
I have been living in Europe for the past quarter century. It has been 20 years since I began singing Japanese songs as a singer of classical music. This may sound a bit peculiar. When Japanese classical music singers study abroad, their goal is often to take the stage doing opera. That's exactly the dream I had when I came Europe on a scholarship from the German government. I studied at a music school in Berlin, entered a contest in Munich, met my husband, a pianist from Vienna, and began performing in the German theater.

One day I received a letter from a Japanese recording label offering me an opportunity to make a new album about Japanese popular songs. This would end up having a tremendous impact on my life as a singer. Unexpected encounters are really a mysterious thing.

I then came to realize something that I definitely would have never thought of had I spent my whole life in Japan. Although the "Japanese songs" that I sing evoke nostalgic feelings in Japanese people, they apparently do not sound "Japanese" to Westerners. I find it interesting that my Viennese husband, who performs with me on my CD recordings as well as on stage, is still asked in Japan, "How can you [even though you are not Japanese] grasp and communicate the heart of Japan so well in your play?" The answer requires a little bit of specialized information and a little bit of emotional subtlety.

To put it simply, taking from the music history the lyrics in the Japanese songs that I sing happen to be written in Japanese, but 95% of the songs have their musical origins in Europe. So the songs are not all that "alien" to him at all. Also, to speak more on the level of emotional subtlety, we Japanese have the unconscious perception of our own culture as being "unique," and tend to believe that foreigners cannot fully understand it. Thus a disinclination to understand that "Japanese songs" are not really Japan's own is conveyed by the person asking the question.

To prevent any misunderstandings, however, I have to add that while these songs are not "Japanese songs" from a purely musical perspective, their lyrics are very beautifully Japanese. They are rich with Japanese emotion, ambience and landscapes, and perhaps, therefore, the real question is how I, as a



singer, manage to evoke the imagery of that world “in by using European music.” The most difficult part about singing Japanese songs is translating lyrics that are written in Japanese, where meanings are hidden between the lines and the subject is often vague, into the extremely logical framework of German, and explaining them in an easily comprehensible manner to my pianist husband.

But this process, more than anything else, has inspired an awareness of and interest in words. Although I had always enjoyed reading, I had always used Japanese, my native language, without much thought. As my husband appropriately put it, there are a lot of song lyrics whose key words are “sad, lonely, tears or stars,” but songs that can be called “art songs” are written based on literary lyrics. It seems that the process of having to first fully digest the lyrics for myself allows various worlds to open up inside of me. Perhaps this is because, as they say, “words are culture.”

With the multitude and proliferation of television programs today, buzz words seem to spread like wildfire. I say that it “seems” this way because I, having been away from Japan for so long, have not been fully subject to the influence of this phenomena, and I have not really watched TV while I’ve been here in Vienna. Even when I’m in Japan I am not in the habit of turning on the TV. When I do occasionally turn it on, I hear a plethora of words that I am not familiar with, and sometimes unconsciously end up turning to the old-style historical samurai dramas! The words I use in conversation have something of a fossilized flavor to them, and people seem to have to strain to listen to me. I rather selfishly interpret this as a positive thing.

Although people often talk about how the Japanese language has been distorted, according to books by Inoue Hisashi, this is a natural phenomenon in terms of the history of the development of language, and Japan is rare among countries in terms of the way the correct “standard language” has become so well established. I have therefore started to become rather generous about it recently. One unfortunate development, however, is the tendency in school to exclude ancient Japanese poems from the academic curriculum because they are difficult to understand even though they are an important part of Japanese culture. (This may eventually lead to the loss of the songs based on these poems altogether.) Human beings are designed to have doubts about things they do not understand, to question the things they doubt, and then to develop an interest in or knowledge of the things they question. But this tendency is not limited to education in Japan. In Germany and Austria as well, epic poems by Goethe or Schiller, whose memorization was a fundamental part of the educational curriculum 40 years ago, have now been virtually eliminated from it.

But I have strayed from my main theme. If you find

yourself in Vienna, a city truly at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, you will have numerous opportunities to interact with a number of different languages. Of course, every language has its own aesthetics of sound, but in some senses I do not think any language can sound quite as beautiful or quite as ugly as Japanese. It’s not just about how the language sounds, but about its modes of expression, the complexity of selecting the subject or ending of a sentence, the infusion of implicit signals, or what might be called nuance, the multitude of homonyms, and the way the language even gives expression to the speaker’s personality.

When my mother-in-law tried to learn some Japanese, the main source of her frustration was the difference between the spoken language and the written language. Unfortunately, I had no way of explaining that difference to her. Perhaps this is a unique characteristic of the Japanese language. A great number of works by Japanese authors have recently been introduced, but how carefully are these works treated when they are translated? Take, for example, works by Endo Shusaku, which are relatively neutral in style, except his *korian-mono*, or informal essays. The German translation of his works focuses on the key point of the content, providing a certain level of intellectual satisfaction. The quality of writing in works by Murakami Haruki, who is very popular right now, can also be read in his translations, perhaps because of the content or perhaps because of his established style.

But could the richness of words in works by authors like Miyabe Miyuki, for example, who widely varies her written expressions for the same concept, be retained in a translation? I actually developed this skepticism from being on the opposite side of the issue. I was impressed by the work of the famous Austrian author Stephan Zweig, and once looked for a translated version of his book in Japanese for my friend. I did find it, but it was much too “lofty and esoteric.” I was concerned that, when Japanese people saw the text, they would be too troubled to read it. His German, however, while intellectual, is really quite simple and easy to understand, full of mood and tone, and is even in some sense poetic. Is this difference the responsibility of the translator alone? Or could it be an unconscious perception among the Japanese that topics of an elevated intellectual nature need to be discussed using difficult terminology?

If that is the case, then the problem is not one of mere translation. It would be a terrible shame if, because of this perception, we were to miss out on some truly wonderful books and ideas. The same can happen with music. Even if a self-satisfied approach to enlightenment is highly regarded among connoisseurs, it cannot truly leave an impression on the souls of everyday people. As a person whose work involves an element of culture, perhaps I always have to be careful.

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