

Lining Up for the Opera

By Susumu Takigawa

Nowadays one is likely to hear talk in Japan of the "lobster and opera phenomenon." If lobster and opera don't seem to have much in common, think again. To the Japanese, lobsters have long been considered a luxury. Today, Japan is the destination for tons of imported lobster. Nor is the delicacy the only catch from foreign waters. Just as foreign lobsters have begun adorning the plates at Japanese gourmet dinners, so too have imported operas begun to be enjoyed by an increasing number of Japanese people.

As the nation experiences an unprecedented "opera boom," one thing that stands out as a symbol of the nature of Japan's new wealth is corporate sponsorship. There has been a rash of performances by famous foreign opera troupes "crowned," as the Japanese put it, by the names of their corporate sponsors, a cast of characters taken right off the First Section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

Corporate sponsorship is not exactly new. For more than a decade, Japanese companies have vied for the rights to sponsor or cosponsor international sporting events. These "crowned sports," so named for the corporate monikers that head their titles, have become a common part of the Japanese sports scene, be it golf or tennis or even American football.

Now, however, the sponsorship fever has spread from the turf to the stage. The refined cultural air that Japanese associate with the opera house will, the sponsors hope, rub off on their own corporate image.

Leading credit company Marui Co. began the corporate opera season this July with a performance of Verdi's *Aida*. No minor undertaking this: the show was staged in the Tokyo Dome, a baseball stadium with an inflatable roof, on a

4,000-square-meter stage large enough to hold a full-scale replica of the Sphinx. The production, put together by the Canadian-based International Opera Festival, mobilized literally a cast of thousands—2,000 to be exact—together with 22 elephants, camels and other animals. Some 100,000 people were said to have taken part in the spectacle.

Marui's customers tend to be young, and according to its president, Tadao Aoi, opera should be just what they're looking for. "I'm sure young people were able to identify with the sheer scale, and with that brilliance that you can find only in the real thing," he says.

The real thing. That has become one of the watchwords of today's wealthy Japan. Asahi Breweries has been pursuing a cultural and sports sponsorship program under the banner, "Bringing the World's Best to Japan" for years now, and this coming December's big event will be—interestingly enough—Verdi's *Aida*. Instead of going for size, Asahi is going for "the real thing": Italy's Arena di Verona opera company has under its wing some of the greatest stars in opera.

Another opera production will be coming to Japan lock, stock and barrel in October. This time it will be the London production of Bizet's *Carmen*, and the crown on the head of this event will be Mitsubishi Electric Corp. One of the auditoriums of Tokyo's Olympic-era National Stadium complex will be turned into a theater with a circular stage measuring 30 meters across plunked down in the middle of it. The audience will sit around the edge of the impromptu stage for a unique theatrical experience.

In fact, however, *Carmen* wasn't what Mitsubishi originally had in mind. At first they, too, wanted to do *Aida*. But with Marui and Asahi rushing in with their



Tokyu Bunkamura Hall in Tokyo where the Bayreuth Festival 1989 is to be held

own productions, the electrical equipment maker had to look for an equally attractive alternative. "People have a strong image of us as a maker of heavy electrical equipment," says Hachiro Hayashi, head of Mitsubishi's publicity department. "Our main goal is to change our image and appeal to the young."

West Germany's Bayreuth Festival has a reputation for putting on the best Wagner productions in the world. They also have a reputation for never performing outside their own theater. It was the Tokyu group that managed to change the second half of that equation. When the cultural complex "Tokyu Bunkamura" (Culture Village) opens in Tokyo's Shibuya district in September, the West German troupe's production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* will head the bill.

Bunkamura has a large performance hall, a smaller performance hall, an art museum, two mini-theaters, restaurants and other facilities, and has been in the planning for eight years. The Tokyu group negotiated with Bayreuth for three years to nail down the star performance.

"At first we thought we'd just invite the chorus," says Uzuhiko Tanaka, planning chief for the Bunkamura. "Eventually, though, we invited the whole opera production. There was a condition that we include their specifications in the construction work on the hall."

Japan is said to be a "corporate society," with corporations taking the lead out of the hands of individuals. In a sense, the current opera boom is no exception. Yet at the very least, the willingness of Japan's money-rich corporations to put their funds into bringing the best of world culture to Japan instead of shipping more Japanese products abroad is being well received by an increasingly affluent citizenry.

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Verdi's *Aida* staged in the Tokyo Dome—a typical example of a "crowned" event program

