

# Opera Culture in Japan: Is the Recent Boom Genuine ?

By Marumoto Takashi

Nowadays Japan's opera culture appears to be prospering. The quickest way to confirm this would be to cast a glance at the opera section of a hyper-bookshop in the center of Tokyo, where one can find all kinds of books crowded in a large stack, from guides for beginners introducing the plots of pieces, librettos and scores to technical books including numerous translations. During a recent visit to Europe I could not see any shops with so many opera books in stock.

Certainly it reflects the present situation of opera culture in Japan. These days, opera companies from all over the world come to Japan, and on a massive scale, carrying the entire staff and all of the stages. From our home we can enjoy repertoires of first-class houses such as La Scala, the Vienna State Opera, Covent Garden or the Met. And their performances are often held with more eminent stars than are usually held in their own houses, which could be seen

nowhere else in the world. The famous Three Great Tenors have repeatedly been in Japan. Here, it is not difficult to enjoy such worldwide topical performances as Wagner under the direction of Valery Gergiev, or of Mozart staged by Peter Konwitschny.

## ■ Not Rooted in Society

Japan is, however, not just a passive "importer" of opera culture. Two native opera companies have been active for more than a half century. Numerous opera works have been written by Japanese composers. "Twilight Crane" by Dan Ikuma, for example, attracted international attention early as a Japanese national opera. More recently, an opera titled "Jr. Butterfly" with the son of Cio-Cio-San as its hero was performed at the Puccini festival in Italy and was well received. The people participating in this work, in composition, writing and performing, are all Japanese.

It was a pure domestic product "exported" from Japan.

Opera culture really is flourishing here. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if it is generally rooted in Japan's society. Looking at my surroundings, I find very few opera lovers among neighbors, relatives or colleagues. The overwhelming majority of them are so unconcerned with opera that they have never gone to one and have no desire to go in future.

Naturally, it would also be difficult to conclude that opera is enjoying great popularity in its birthplace Europe. Still, it is not just "upper class" visitors. There are also people with less knowledge of opera who are under the impression it cannot be bypassed in their social life. An opera house is generally not always a place that is difficult to enter. People visit them sometimes once or twice a year for cultural enrichment, sometimes together with their acquaintances for social intercourse and sometimes freely as tourists.

Photo: Kyodo News



Two Japanese singers perform during a scene of *Jr. Butterfly*, a sequel to *Madame Butterfly*, staged at a Puccini festival.

Photo: Yomiuri Shimbun

## Wide Gap Between Elite, Public

In Japan, in contrast, even intellectuals do not seem to come under the pressure that they should acquaint themselves with opera and rarely count opera-going among their pastimes. Former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro is famous as a great lover of opera, but it does not mean that opera-going is natural for celebrities in Japan; it is no more than the individual taste of this “odd fellow.” Passages from “Aida”, “Ring of the Nibelung” and so on are sometimes used in TV commercials in order to improve the image of high-quality goods, and yet it does not lead one who made a big profit on the stock market into adorning oneself with opera-going. In Japan, the audience for opera is made up almost entirely of those who are truly fond of it.

Such a wide gap between the enthusiasm of a small elite group and the indifference of the general public is observed in the theater culture of Japan in general too. It relates to Japan’s peculiar cultural situation, which is quite different from that of Western countries where theater has long formed a part of the public life by being well publicly aided. In the process of the modernization of this country, theater did not play such an important role as to afford it a high social status. Probably as a result of a tendency from the feudal Edo period to regard theater as mere amusement within a private territory, this continues still today and it seems we have no integrated common theater culture. It is connected with the fact that theater has not been so deeply established in Japanese society as literature, music or painting.

## Still “Otaku” Culture in Japan

Indeed, if we focus our attention on Tokyo, we can see a theatrical scene that might be one of the best in the world both in quality and in quantity. While traditional performing arts such as Noh and Kabuki win popularity, various categories of modern theater are very active, including the Western-style “new drama,” “small playhouses” as an alternative to these traditional arts, commercial theaters, the all-female *Takarazuka* revue company, and so forth. And yet



Then Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro chats with Bologna opera troupe performers after enjoying a performance in Japan.

most visitors are hardly aware of the common concept of “theater” above all these categories. I wonder how many lovers there are who see different kinds of drama. The majority of Kabuki-goers probably do not see performances of modern theater. Only a few companies of modern theater can gather wide ranges of audiences. Most of those are closely connected with their fanatics who adore specific troupe leaders or actors. Not all fans of Noda Hideki or the Caramel Box devote themselves to theater in general.

The present state of opera culture in Japan, as mentioned above, can be well understood in this context. Here, too, fans consist of small numbers of devotees who have a liking for opera as an individual taste or interest. Such specific conditions, like tickets being too expensive to encourage potential audiences to attend theaters without any sense of purpose, give impetus to this state. Dramatic performances are quite expensive, and in the case of opera it is almost impossible to gain a ticket for under \$50 and even one for \$500 is not a novelty. Understandably, opera-goers in Japan have on the whole a high appreciation, because they visit theaters without sparing expense. Maybe that is the reason why those who bring opera from abroad admire Japanese audiences for their good response, although these audiences behave with “Japanese” reserve. At all events, opera — as well as general theater culture — still seems to be, at this stage at least, an “otaku” culture. **JS**

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