

From Japan with Love

By Polly Ferman de Sanchis Munõz

It has already been more than five years since I arrived in Japan. Adding the two years of a previous stay, it makes quite some time, although never enough. During all this time, I have been completely spoiled by Japanese friends and acquaintances.

I was very lucky because I have been here not only as the wife of an Ambassador, but also as an artist in my own right. My pampering by Japanese people includes my experience as an artist in the many performances I have given in this country.

Japan treats artists very well not only by respecting every need or desire of the performer but also by offering an incredible amount of good halls, wonderful acoustics and in my case, excellent piano selection. Audiences are in general very warm and responsive.

Cultural life in Japan is extraordinary and unique, given the amount of concerts, the quality of the performers, the variety of repertoires and information given to the audience. In any given day, one can select entertainment from a vast array of choices, such as a performance by three or four renowned Symphonic Orchestras, several Chamber groups from around the world, the Argentine tango, the Kabuki Theater, the Bunraku performance, soloists, ballet, etc.

Being a diplomat gives us the chance to attend many of these performances.

In the many times I attended concerts, recitals, ballets and theater performances during my first stay in Japan, something caught my attention: I never saw handicapped people in the theaters. Actually, although the streets are designed for sight-impaired people and those in wheelchairs, I can count with my fingers the number I have seen in the audiences in my more than seven years in Japan.

THE GOAL

Many times I have been asked about



The Ambassador's wife greets one of her guests

what I would like to reach with my career. I tried to picture myself receiving standing ovations, playing everywhere in the world, being really famous. But, although some of this is already happening, it was not the answer. There must be something else, I thought.

It was always important for me to play for the enjoyment of everybody. To reach not only those who understand how Beethoven should be played or listened, but "everybody". That is why, after many years of playing the European repertoire, I decided, some ten years ago, to dedicate myself to promoting Latin American classical music.

The decision was made under two premises: the first one is that this wonderful but not very well-known music would be heard, and second, as they are mainly short pieces, it would be easy for the listener to understand and enjoy. Some pieces are very romantic; others are very rhythmical and related in some ways to dances from countries already familiar to the Japanese — Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and others. In

specializing in this music, I wished to reach a wider audience.

Then, still thinking about "playing for everybody", not too long after my arrival to Tokyo the second time, I contacted several sources to offer my music to those who were not attending cultural events.

I tried hospitals, churches, and benefit associations. I received no positive answer. Nobody could offer assistance.

Besides my professional performances, I started giving many charity concerts to raise funds for various worthy causes. But, although it felt very good to contribute with my performances to the purchase of hospital equipment, school appliances, and to help those affected by the Kobe earthquake, it was still not what I mostly wanted to do.

THEN, IT ALL STARTED

A year and a half ago, my husband and I were invited by H.I.H. Prince Tomohito of Mikasa to a Band Concert at the Budo Kan, a very large stadium in Tokyo. The proceeds were going to several Japanese institutions for the handicapped that

Prince Tomohito supports.

Upon my arrival at the stadium, I could not believe my eyes: the whole first floor, surrounding the stage, was full of wheelchairs!!!! And there was nearly one helper for each impaired person.

Then I found out that this Prince, a first cousin of His Majesty, the Emperor of Japan, has been devoted, for the last 25 years, to helping handicapped people.

Through a relative of Prince Tomohito of Mikasa, I asked about the possibility of inviting some people from Institutions sponsored by His Imperial Highness to our residence, located above our Embassy, where I would play for them. The answer was positive, that about 50 people from three different institutions were to come.

Then I started receiving information about who was coming: their names, their ages, their health conditions, the schedule of arrival, departure, their means of transportation, etc., etc.

Well: THAT WAS ORGANIZATION!!!!!!

MY FIRST "CONCERT FROM THE HEART"

The day and time was set. As I knew most of my audience would be aged people coming to our residence, I had to start thinking about all of their special needs — where to seat them, how to move them, where could they move.

I made special arrangements to accommodate them; for example, I covered the corners of low glass tables with shoulder pads and then a table cloth because I did not want anybody to get hurt. I spent sleepless nights considering what I would play for them and in which order. I thought and thought. It was so important to me! I loved the idea! It had to be just right!!

Then, when the day arrived, I knew everything was going to be wonderful.

They came in vans, in wheelchairs, with canes, with the help of others.

They wore their best clothes. They were thrilled to come to an Embassy, to have an Ambassador's wife playing for



Meeting members of the audience

them. I spoke in my broken Japanese, and I played for them with no tension. We immediately loved one another.

After my recital, we had something to eat and drink and they gave me little souvenirs that they had prepared especially for me. It was a dream come true.

A DOOR IS OPENED

In the meantime, it seems, a door was opened for me and I was lucky enough to be asked to give concerts in two other places: in a school where I played for 150 severally mentally handicapped children (it was so incredible that they started dancing and clapping with the rhythm of the music) and in a hospital for children with muscle disorders. They attended in wheelchairs and beds. Some of them could not communicate by speech, but I know they were reached by the music.

AND, as happens with all good things, after you try them, it is hard to stop. I wanted more!!!!

I realized that my new friends who came to my residence had been healthy enough to be mobile. What happened to those confined in hospital beds or institutions? I wanted to go there.

AGAIN I tried Prince Tomohito of Mikasa. After a while, just when it seemed too difficult to pursue, my secretary received a call from the Prince's secretary asking:

1) Was I really willing to play in institutions for disabled people?

2) Was I willing to travel around Japan?

3) If both answers were in the affirmative, when would I be able to do it?

1) YES,

2) YES,

3) DURING MY SUMMER VACATION!!!!!!

To make the story short (a hard statement to make at this point), we traveled from July 27 to August 26: Beppu, Okinawa, Osaka, Aichi, Gotemba, Miyagi, and Hokkaido. Nine recitals in five weeks. On six occasions Prince Tomohito accompanied me,

on three others, I traveled together with Princess Tomohito of Mikasa. We traveled back and forth from Tokyo, most of the time having two presentations in one single trip.

THE TOUR STARTS

At the beginning of this tour, most of the organizers were nervous because it was the first time the wife of an Ambassador and a professional concert pianist were going to these institutions to play the piano. Yet I was incredibly happy and excited... I was sure it was going to be wonderful.

At my first presentation I realized that there were only a few wheelchairs in the audience. Where are the rest of the people, I thought. What about the disabled ones? The organizers told me that they had not been included to avoid distracting me. Then I explained that I wanted to play for everybody: not only for the "better-suited" but for everybody.

It did not matter if there was noise, if they had to take someone out in the middle of a piece, if members of the audience moved about. Nothing bothered me, except the thought that someone would be left out for fear of disturbing me. I did not want stages, just a piano located in the middle of the area in which I was to play. (The piano was generously sent, on every occasion, by the Yamaha Foundation.) I needed my audience's energy and their love. I also needed to give them mine. An invisible string was broken and after that IT WAS MAGICAL! After that I knew why I am

a pianist.

During my tour I LEARNED so much, I ENJOYED so much, I RECEIVED so much, I LOVED so much.

I LEARNED what it means to help handicapped people. Prince Tomohito taught me that to help impaired people means to teach them how to be independent.

They have to fight to learn how to love life. They have to become skilled although they can hardly move in a wheelchair. They must learn how to participate in ski competitions, including the Olympics, although they cannot see or walk.

Let me share what I learned: I saw how a young man, with severe muscle dystrophy, in a wheelchair to support his body, typing, although with much difficulty, into a computer. He was typing the lines of a book so that somebody else could translate them into Braille, so that somebody else with no sight could read and enjoy. It was a wonderful lesson of HELPING. It taught me that we can always help others.

I saw TV programs produced and acted by handicapped people which were dedicated to others with similar conditions.

I saw a man with no arms working in a factory, using his feet and toes. He was writing, calculating and turning the pages, as we normally do with our hands.

I saw whole factories with impaired workers. I saw very difficult computer production carried out by very severely handicapped people.

Then I realized how handicapped I am, and we all are: I cannot ski, I cannot read Braille, I cannot write music on the computer. I cannot make motorcycle helmets, I cannot produce TV stage sets on the computer. They can do so many things I cannot or we cannot do!

I ENJOYED playing for them, changing my repertoire and the order of the pieces until I got the right program. The best experience was to start happy, having them *te-bioshi* with me. Then a few romantic pieces, but mainly happy ones. I ended with Sakura Sakura and La Cumparsita. They loved it and I loved it with them. It was fun!!

Before this tour, in my professional

performances, I always had a ritual of concentration, of not talking to anybody the previous day, of breathing, concentrating and meditating.

It was almost impossible for me to play publicly unless I did all this.

During the five-week tour there was no time to do any of that. But most important: there was no need.

Talking to them, being with them, touching them before, during and after the performances, was my breathing, my concentration and my meditation.

As it was very important for me to address my audience every time, my Japanese was gradually getting better. In general, Japanese people appreciate it very much if you try communicating with them in their own language.

But the best communication was with the "touching". In my experience in Japan, people, at least publicly, do not TOUCH. They bow to greet, but normally they do not make "body contact".

I felt that when people are sick, they would be more open to touch, and so I touched them. I loved to kiss them on the cheek, to hold their hands, to hug them.

I could sense they were happy and how we became friends. I heard the many stories they were telling me, through their holding of my hand, through their tears of happiness. I also cried tears of happiness many times. I am still doing it every time I talk about it, and now while I write these, my first lines about the subject.

I RECEIVED so much: they danced for me, they sang for me, they painted for me, they wrote for me. They seemed to have fun when I told them after the concert: "ask me anything you want, including how old I am". They always laughed, but never dared to ask. I volunteered information about myself, including my age.

I told them about my children, my grandchildren, my career, what it meant to be a concert pianist and at the same time, the wife of an Ambassador.

WE LOVED one another. It was more than "rapport". It was real friendship!

All of this has been a titanic work of organization: Prince Tomohito of Mikasa

never stopped working. Before every trip my schedule was faxed to me several times, including small corrections: His Highness considered every detail, every need. He thought about things you would never guess a Prince from the Imperial Household would consider. For example, as the Prince knew that I like to have pasta before playing, as it is said to give energy, I received the menus of the hotels where I would be staying, so I could select in advance which type of spaghetti and sauce I would eat prior to the concerts.

The schedule was organized minute by minute.

There was so much thought put into it and perfection.

There was so much love and dedication.

He contemplated every small detail affecting me, my secretary, Ritsuko-san, and the piano students or friends who accompanied me.

Princess Tomohito is the image of elegance and refinement. Her Highness taught me in the most difficult visits, in institutions where sometimes our eyes would give us difficult images to absorb, just to GIVE and LOVE.

It was so strong, it was wonderful, it was the real Japan, with all its sufferings and achievements.

How could I ask for more than having this golden brooch to my life in this wonderful country.

Yes, this period of my life in Japan has finished. When these lines reach you, I will already have left this country. But not for good.

I am returning to Japan to give concerts in October. I will continue to play professionally, and for my many friends in the institutions, and for new ones I will encounter from now on.

My gratitude to this country will continue for the rest of my life.

Thank you Prince and Princess Tomohito of Mikasa.

THANK YOU JAPAN

JTI

Polly Ferman de Sanchis Munoz is the wife of the former Argentine Ambassador to Japan and is also a pianist.