

# Brilliant Pianist Tribe

Western classical music first entered the Japanese elementary school curriculum in the late 19th century. It was to prove one of the most successful of all imports. A century later, Japan's indigenous music is in eclipse, and the nation has become one of the world's largest Western music markets. At the same time, a growing corps of Japanese musicians are taking their place at the forefront of the world classical music scene.

Enter Hiroko Nakamura, whose small stature and delicate hands belie her fame as one of the rare musical talents of her generation. Since her concert debut at age 15 in 1960, she has won a legion of loyal fans for her brilliant interpretations of the works of Western masters. Her diary is always fully booked with global engagements. The remaining months of this year will take her to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Moscow, Bolzano, Leeds and Warsaw for concerts and competition judging.

In between this staggering schedule, she has found time to establish herself as an essayist rich in expression and humor. She won the 1989 Oya Nonfiction Prize, a prestigious literary prize in Japan, for her essays. In "The Pianist Tribe," a series of essays in the Japanese leading monthly *Bungei Shunju*, she gently satirizes herself and her colleagues in the rarified world of classical piano music. "I sometimes experience the funny feeling that we pianists are like unsophisticated survivors from ancient times," she wrote in one installment. "We're very different from rational modern humans."

Any concert pianist shares a history of practicing seven to eight hours a day since the age of three or four. To play just one piece, the pianist must memorize an incredible number of notes—28,736 in Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto alone (she counted them herself, and it took half a day). It's a task requiring tremendous endurance and sharp intelligence. Like the ancients, concert pianists must be willing to go to the extreme, expressing their feelings openly and committing themselves to a task for which the reward may not come until far in the future, if ever.

With a cat and dog sharing her lap, the famed pianist spoke with the *Journal* in a spacious salon big enough to dwarf her grand piano. Seeing her in repose, it is hard to connect her with her grand appearance on stage. Truly, at the keyboard,

she transforms herself into a member of the "ancient tribe."

**Question:** You graduated from the Julliard School in 1966. As a young music student exposed to a foreign culture for the first time, you must have experienced culture shock.

**Answer:** I did, in two respects. First, the outlook on music. Music education in Japan back then was governed by the cult of Western civilization on the one hand and a feudalistic hierarchical tutorial system on the other. In that environment, music lessons were simply a forum for moral training and meeting obligations. The Confucian disapproval of pleasure reigned supreme even in the music world. It was in America that I first learned the joy of music.

Secondly, I keenly felt the comfort of American life and the spiritual richness of the American people. I entered Julliard in 1963. That was the year President Kennedy was assassinated. America was already deeply involved in the Vietnam War. Yet even then, the good old America remained intact outside of the big cities.

**Interview with Hiroko Nakamura, concert pianist, by Ritsuko Misu, editorial manager of the Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry**



Hiroko Nakamura

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Prior to enrolling in Julliard, I stayed at the home of a lawyer in Minnesota who offered to be my guarantor for formalizing the documents I had to submit to the school. I was surprised by how strict the family was in bringing up their two daughters, both several years my senior, and by the rich yet frugal life they lived.

Since then America has changed, and I have become acquainted with many other Americans. But the generosity and warmth of my first American friends still remain in my memory. After the lawyer and his wife died and their daughters moved away, I lost contact with the family. But when I was in New York on tour in February last year, my manager got a telephone call from the two daughters from Minnesota. They'd seen a newspaper advertisement for my concert. I invited them to New York for a happy reunion.

**Q:** *Many of the virtuosos who enriched the 20th century music world have died in the past few years. Could you share some of your encounters with them?*

**A:** Pianists mostly play on their own, so we have relatively little contact with other musicians. But I will never forget such conductors as Karl Böhm and Lovro von Matacic.

During an overseas concert tour, I played Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto with an orchestra conducted by Matacic for four days in a row. Matacic was a man of gigantic stature, and seemed somewhat clumsy with his hands and not so quick in his reflexes. When we came to the cadenzas, his baton could not keep up with my piano. For the first two days we did not get along at all. On the third day, though, we finally hit it off. The instant we finally played every difficult passage in unison, Matacic stopped his baton and gave me a signal: "We made it!"

Let me tell you another episode about Anatole Fistoulari, the Russian-born British conductor. He suffered a heart attack right before a concert of the London Symphony Orchestra, in which I was a soloist. He was fuzzy from his medicine, and was in no condition to conduct. The concert master of the orchestra, still playing his instrument, took over and conducted us all so the audience would not notice. I played the piano watching him, not Fistoulari. As the orchestra finally finished the concert, the concert master whispered to Fistoulari, "It's over, maestro."

**Q:** *Chopin is your forte. Can you tell us something about Poland, his homeland?*

**A:** There were several survivors of the wartime resistance movement among the members of the

Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra when I played with them some 10 years ago. The then concert master was one, and he told me how he survived. He was caught by the German Gestapo and was brought before a firing squad. He was ordered up against the wall, but just before the order to fire, a fellow resistance fighter came his rescue and gunned down the Gestapo. The resistance fighter emigrated to Australia after the war and became a businessman. When the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra came to Tokyo on a concert tour 20 years later, the resistance fighter-turned businessman also happened to be in Tokyo on a business trip and the two men had a happy reunion.

I've never experienced war, and I only listened casually to their stories. But as I've watched the recent upheavals in Eastern Europe, I've come to realize the importance of those wartime incidents I heard about from Polish musicians.

I'm going to Warsaw this autumn to judge the Chopin Competition. I am looking forward to the visit very much.

**Q:** *What is the state of piano music today, and where is it headed?*

**A:** The piano was perfected as a musical instrument in the age of the late romantic school in the late 19th century. Piano technique and piano theory were perfected by the end of the century. It was Chopin who enhanced the charm of piano music. Liszt followed, and then Rachmaninoff gave the supreme and final brilliance to the instrument.

Music since World War II is quite different from what it was before the war. Rachmaninoff was the last pianist-composer. Since then, composing has been separated from performance. The piano as an instrument has already gone as far as it can go. So have piano technique and theory. Today, piano music has lost its power and is stranded. To escape this impasse, we need a genius who can show us a beauty transcending these limits. Yet the present age will not allow the emergence of a genius. Audiences are so diversified that it is hard to decide where the real values are. An overabundance of information makes people uneasy. The human spirit does not mature in an uneasy society. Such an environment is inhospitable to powerful art.

**Q:** *From the side of the audience, it seems that musicians have a universal language. Frankly, we envy them.*

**A:** That is a great illusion, and is extremely optimistic. Music may certainly be an easier way to communicate than language. But to think that

music is a universal language is a misconception of Japanese who merely want it to be so. The people who own the music do not agree. To be pedantic, Western music is the fruit of the blood, sweat and tears of each European race. Beneath Western music lies the strong consciousness of European people, rooted in their blood. Western music is theirs.

**Q:** *Japanese audiences are said to be too soft on musicians. They care so much about the name value of artists that they will applaud even second-rate performances by top-rate performers.*

**A:** I think things are changing. Some audience members have higher standards, especially in big cities like Tokyo where there are all levels of music fans. The level of an audience depends on the agent, sponsor and performer. In the case of the corporate-sponsored concerts now in vogue here in Japan, audience members can almost all be invited guests who do not usually follow classical music.

But this phenomenon is not limited to Japan. In Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" symphony, there is a passage where the music builds to a climax, followed by a pause. Uneducated listeners are prone to applaud there, thinking that the piece is over. This even happened once when Kirill Kondrashin was conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra in New York's Carnegie Hall before his exile in the West. As the thunderous applause arose, Kondrashin smiled, bowed and retreated backstage. Even in Carnegie Hall, the audience doesn't necessarily know its music. In a multiracial town like New York, audiences are often "ethnically" enthusiastic, even without being musically knowledgeable. Kondrashin's Carnegie Hall concert may have drawn such an audience.

**Q:** *Japan is giving the impression abroad that it can buy up European culture with its money. Do Westerners find such behavior irritating?*

**A:** Historically, culture develops where there is wealth, regardless of age and region. Japan has just become rich for the first time in its history. It may be no more than 10 years since this has happened, and Japan is still a sort of nouveau riche. But if Japan can maintain its economic strength, it will not be blamed for its current behavior; it is just a transitional phenomenon. Nor do I think it is necessarily bad for Japan to be acting this way. Real culture, not borrowed culture, will emerge and take root in time.

It is good that companies are spending their profits on cultural activities. But I am displeased that tickets for corporate-sponsored concerts are

so expensive. Corporate profits are not actually being returned to the audience.

**Q:** *Non-Europeans are becoming a force to be reckoned with in the classical music world. There are reportedly as many as 4,000 to 5,000 Japanese musicians in Europe and America. There are reports of such large numbers of Japanese musicians causing friction in Europe and America, and of moves to shut them out.*

**A:** I think these frictions have various causes. In some cases, the Japanese themselves may be to blame. There may also be racial discrimination, although ostensibly no such discrimination exists in the music world. Some Europeans and Americans stubbornly ignore Asians. Whether they accept Japanese as their colleagues depends on the extent to which Japanese dissociate themselves from their Japanese identity and try to assimilate into Western society.

However, the days when Europe was the center of classical music are gone. The Tchaikovsky Competition now draws contestants from 130 countries. Non-Europeans are not yet a major force, but their presence can no longer be ignored. As the center of gravity of the world economy moves, so does the music market. Willingly or unwillingly, the classical music world will inevitably have to recognize the emergence of a new wave. An international piano competition will be held in Taiwan for the first time next year. It will not be long before South Korea follows.

**Q:** *Will Tokyo become an influential music market?*

**A:** Tokyo hosts as many as 30 concerts a day, major and minor. The quality of all of them is quite high. Yet Japan still has little weight in world music circles. When a permanent conductor is named to the NHK Symphony Orchestra, does it become a topic of interest around the world? Only when world music circles take serious interest in the leader of the NHK Orchestra will Japan cease to be a music market known only for its sheer size, and begin to carry real weight in the music world.

Japan now pays vast sums to support a rash of concerts by world musicians, not only in classical music such as the recent performances by full opera troupes and symphony orchestras, but in every genre. Japan must tell the world in clear terms that millions of dollars flow out of Japan every year to support the world's music.

It seems to me that so-called Japan-bashing partly results from the fact that Japan does not try hard enough to speak for itself. Japan must tell the world clearly what it is doing. ■

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