

A Question of Manners

By Hiroyuki Iwaki

I have had the opportunity to work in many different countries throughout the world over the past 30 years. As an orchestra conductor, of course, I can only ply my trade in countries where there is a formal symphony orchestra, so there are still many countries where I have not been able to work.

In addition, there is one country that I will not visit despite its having outstanding orchestras. That country is South Africa. In full sympathy with the United Nations' resolution, I have resolved not to set foot in South Africa until that government does away with its apartheid policies. This is not to say I have not been invited. Many is the time I have been asked to conduct in Johannesburg and Cape Town, but I have always turned down the requests, being sure to tell them why. Every time I refuse, they sweeten the offer with more money and other incentives. And every time, I telex my regrets that I cannot oblige because of my opposition to apartheid.

Play and politics

The last offer really caught my attention: "If you will conduct our orchestra, in addition to the monetary rewards, we will arrange for you to play a round of golf with Gary Player at his own country club once for every two concerts you perform." Even though I was able to resist the offer, it was a very painful decision for me. You see, I am a very big Gary Player fan.

Several years ago, I went to Miami to play golf, making reservations to stay at a golf resort hotel. When I arrived, I found the whole place alive with activity. It happened that my vacation coincided with the holding of the Doral Open, with world-famous golfers competing on fairways designed and groomed to challenge the best of the best. Fortunately, the resort also had three courses designed for amateurs, so my wife and I were able to golf in the morning and then watch the pros play in the afternoon.

Because the hotel guests and the tournament pros ate at the same restaurant, this turned out to be a very memorable weekend. I was surrounded by the likes of such golfing legends as Jack Nicklaus and Seve Ballesteros, and on our first night there we had dinner at the same table as Gary Player. He has a very likable, engaging personality as well as an excellent sense of humor, and we had a wonderful evening conversing and laughing together. After that evening, my wife and I became even bigger fans of his, and for the next three days followed him around the course and cheered for him. Between strokes, he chatted good-naturedly with the fans in the gallery. I was very impressed with the way he seemed to care about his audience.

About a month later, we went to the Masters in Augusta, Georgia, in time to watch the final day of play. Pretty much the same group of golfers were playing there as in the Doral Open, and this time Gary was within striking distance of the leader. After he had hit a particularly beautiful shot, I waited for him as he walked down the fairway, and when he

passed in front of me, I shouted out, "Looking good!" Still concentrating on his game and without so much as a glance in my direction, he replied "Thank you" and continued his brisk pace toward the green. When I saw that even Gary Player became serious on the last day of the Masters, I realized just how important a golf tournament it was, and I remember thinking how impressive Gary Player was as he looked straight ahead.

This may look like a long digression, but it is all part of how politics keeps people apart. Gary Player cannot come to Japan to play in front of his many fans, and likewise I cannot go to South Africa to conduct or to play golf with him in Johannesburg. My abhorrence of apartheid just will not allow it.

In my travels around the world, I have found that there are many traits common to mankind that supersede any differences in skin color or language. Take, for example, our interaction with a train or subway. The train stops at the station, the doors open, people get off and people get on, and when it is time for the train to depart, the doors automatically shut. Just at



the last minute, one frantic man rushes toward the closing doors, but he is a split second too late. Standing in front of the just-closed doors, there is one response that is common to all men everywhere, regardless of race: the grin of embarrassment. Even if no one else sees you, it is a natural human reaction to smile self-depreciatingly in this situation.

This baffling breed

There are many other shared human behavior traits. People everywhere seem to delight in other people's misfortune, as inexcusable as that may seem to the unfortunate ones. If you do not believe this, just look at the faces of people who have run to the scene of a fire. They are actually smiling. This is true no matter what city or country you may be in. Even the person whose house is burning down was running to enjoy somebody else's fire only yesterday. Every time you come across this situation, you get the feeling that man is one and the same animal after all, no matter what the differences in ethnic origin, language or skin color. Since the beginning of time, men have been killing each other in a constant succession of wars. Why? I do not know if tigers or lions would smile abashedly if they barely missed a train or would run to enjoy watching a neighboring den burn down, but I do know that they generally do not kill their own kind. The smiles and grins of human beings may be an indication of higher intelligence, but I have trouble understanding man's propensity to kill his fellow men.

There are obviously many differences between East and West. When I first went to Europe, I was astounded at the very loud noise Westerners made blowing their noses in restaurants. It sounded just like a blast from a train whistle, and it certainly put quite a damper on my appetite. At the time, I thought the person was very ill-mannered, although I have since learned that it is perfectly acceptable in the West to blow your nose in public. The sound is just ignored, as if it were never heard.

I remember one day in the early 1960s when I was in a studio making a recording

with the Great Symphonic Orchestra of the Polish Radio and Television. As I recall, it was a selection by Stravinsky. In the middle of the pianissimo, a musician in the contrabass section blew his nose very loudly. I did a quick double take but continued to conduct as if nothing had happened. When we came to a good place for a break, I went to the mixing room and played back the tape. Sure enough, the sound of a nose being blown came out loud and clear on the tape.

"This is terrible. We have to retake this section," I said.

But the sound man said, "That's just the sound of someone blowing his nose. We can leave it on the tape—no sweat."

Granted we were not recording an album but just a tape meant for one-time broadcast, I was still appalled. This might be too small a thing to qualify as culture shock, but it came close. This took place about 25 years ago, in a much more easy-going time though, and I doubt if the blare of someone's blowing his nose would be broadcast today.

Slurps and sniffles

Around that same time, I was living in Munich with a Japanese friend who was in Germany studying piano. He returned home from a concert one day in an angry mood, complaining that some old lady sitting next to him had ruined the concert for him. This friend of mine always seemed to have a runny nose and this day was no different. It seems that during the concert he had refrained from making sniffling sounds out of respect for those around him, and as a consequence he was constantly wiping his nose. But this seemed to irritate the old lady sitting next to him, so she pulled a fistful of tissues from her handbag, handed them to him, and said, "Here, young man. Now please blow your nose properly."

When my friends and I heard this, we broke out into laughter. As one of us said, "I feel sorry for the old lady. A concert is no place for you to be fidgeting around." But even after the different social customs were explained to him, my pianist friend was still upset about how this busybody had ruined his concert.

There are times when I have dinner with Japanese tourists who have just arrived in Europe, America, Australia or wherever. They are usually friends of friends, and I am obligated to play the host temporarily. When they are middle-aged or older, I take extra special care and do everything I can to take them to Japanese or Chinese restaurants. But it seems they invariably want to go out to a high-class French or German restaurant, and I have no choice but to take them. The critical moment comes when I am explaining the menu to them. I always lie and say, "The soup here is not supposed to be very good," and proceed to recommend only hors d'oeuvres and the main course, deliberately steering them clear of any soup-like substance. The French restaurants I normally go to would probably not let me in again if I brought in a group of tourists who slurped their soup the way most Japanese do at home.

I once had a debate with some German actors concerning the Westerner's nose-blowing and the Japanese's soup-slurping. After a long discussion with both sides initially criticizing the other's poor manners and trying to defend their own nasty habit, we finally arrived at a conclusion. We all agreed that blowing your nose in public is not a particularly class act even to Westerners, and that nor is the loud slurping of soup indicative of refined Japanese manners. This international consensus further convinced me that, fundamentally, humans are indeed all the same breed of animal the world over. ■

(This is the fourth of six essays by Mr. Iwaki).

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