

Looking Beyond Nationality

By Hiroyuki Iwaki

An avid golf fan, I have been to the Masters golf tournament finals in Augusta, Georgia, more times than I can remember. It is the ultimate gallery experience. As a conductor, I am concerned with sound. And one of the things that impresses me about the Masters—the outstanding quality of the play aside—is the way the huge crowds thunderously applaud and cheer their approval of a particularly good shot. And even more so, how quiet the gallery can be when a player is getting ready to tee off, lining up a putt, or in another concentration-demanding situation. At most golf tournaments, you can expect to see tournament officials holding up their “Quiet, please!” signs at such moments. But not at Augusta. There is no need. It is an impressive display of good manners and fair play from the gallery.

Watching the Wimbledon tennis tournament on television recently, I noticed that the umpire had to reprimand the crowd several times with “Quiet, please!” over the public address system. Wimbledon may have been an upper-class entertainment at one time, but oh how the mighty have fallen. But of course, this lack of manners is not limited to Wimbledon. Ill-mannered crowds are, sad to say, a global phenomenon.

Spoiling the mood

I used to be a big fan of Japanese professional baseball, but recently I have lost all desire to take me out to the ball park. I just do not have the patience to put up with the cheering sections’ boisterous and unruly behavior in the outfield bleachers. I don’t mind a little cheering, but these people have brought trumpets, drums, cymbals and other noise-makers to play the team victory song over and over—win or lose. And what one side does, including the incessant chanting by fans who are caught up in the mob-psychology spirit of the event, the other side feels it has to do too.

But it is not complete anarchy. The rule seems to be that they only cheer when their team is at bat. So the two sides take turns deafening everyone around them and the entire time from the top of the first until the bottom of the ninth—or, God forbid, into extra innings—is a continuous cacophony of trumpets, drums and cheers resounding throughout the stadium. There is not a moment of quiet until the fans file out and the ground-keepers take over.

Yet I still like baseball, and I sometimes get out to see major league games in the United States. When someone hits a home run or drives in the game-winning run, or when a fielder makes a great play, the crowd goes wild. Of course, I join in the excitement and make as much noise as the next guy. Right before the pitcher delivers a crucial pitch, however, the tens of thousands of fans all seem to hold their breath at once, and you could hear a hot dog drop. Even when the tempo of the game is dragging, the fans seem to follow an unwritten code of ethics and, like tennis fans were once expected to do, fall quiet when the pitcher goes into his wind-up. It is that moment of sheer silence produced by the two teams and tens of thousands of fans that I really enjoy.

And this is something you can never experience at a Japanese ball park. Because of the endless cheering and shouting, there is no way to savor that moment of excitement that envelops the stadium at critical points in the game. It is as if the cheering fans are not even watching the game. They are there to make noise. I can understand how people who are browbeaten at the office would want to vent their frustrations by going to a ball game, getting half-drunk, and yelling for two or three hours. But this ruins the game for the rest of us—players included. Recently there has been a rash of pop flies that were missed because both players thought the other guy was calling for it. They can’t even hear each other, the way the crowd noise is.

Baseball is very popular in Japan. There are nationwide high school baseball tournaments held twice a year, and all of the schools also bring cheerleading sections to cheer their players to do their best. The cheerleaders do all the pom-pom routines and the brass bands play their hearts out. In many ways, it is very similar to the cheerleading at an American football game—an enviable display of school spirit.

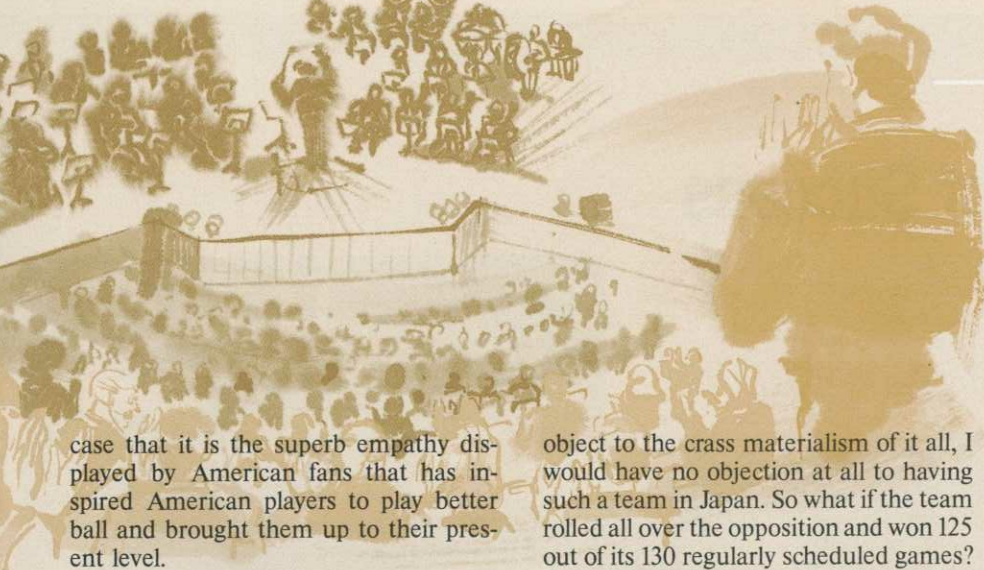
Inspiring the players

There is also an annual intercity baseball tournament pitting company-sponsored semipro teams against each other. Here too, the fans in the stands hold cheering competitions, and I have nothing against such audience-participation enthusiasm up through this level of play. Professional baseball is in a whole different league, however, and it is a shame that the fans can’t tell the difference and that professional baseball players have to play before high-school level fans.

Japanese pro baseball is a dumping grounds for has-beens who can’t make it any longer in the American major leagues. It is a great place for these people to supplement their pensions, and I have no objection to somebody trying to make an honest living.

Still, I do wonder why Japanese baseball is so vastly inferior that major-league mediocres are stars in Japan—and I have finally come to the conclusion that it is the fans that make the difference. Sure, America has a longer baseball tradition, and sure, American players are more muscular, but that is not the main problem. The main problem is that the fans don’t care, and Japanese baseball will never be big-league ball as long as it only has bush-league fans.

In any art, be it music, drama or sports, having an appreciative audience is crucial to raising the level of performance. Of course I realize that sheer ability makes a difference, but you could also make the



case that it is the superb empathy displayed by American fans that has inspired American players to play better ball and brought them up to their present level.

Among its many other attractions, London is also famous for the Promenade Concerts held in the spacious Royal Albert Hall, and Prom audiences are the best in the world. They are quiet during a performance, they know when a performance has been particularly good, and their enthusiastic cheers and bravos both reward and encourage excellence. Warmly supportive of good musicianship, Prom audiences are sharply critical of anything but the best. This does not mean that they boo or hiss, however. Instead, their quietude takes on an icy tenor, and many of them express their disdain for mediocrity by quietly lying down in the aisles.

Improving the quality

Although it is a daunting experience to play the Proms, the fact that the audiences are so knowledgeable and appreciative makes it well worth it. Which is why musicians from all over the world play at the Royal Albert Hall as they play nowhere else. Prom audiences spur them to new heights of excellence.

Getting back to baseball, Japanese professional teams have a quota on the number of non-Japanese players they can play. In the past this was two, but it was raised to three in 1981 with the proviso that no more than two can be on the roster at any one time. Three may be better than two, but I am adamantly opposed to having any quota at all. I suppose the club owners justify this as a way of keeping the playing field level, but I have no patience at all with rules of this kind.

The owners probably think it would destroy Japanese professional baseball business if one company, awash in export profits, hired all the top American baseball players and put together the best baseball team in the world. While I might

object to the crass materialism of it all, I would have no objection at all to having such a team in Japan. So what if the team rolled all over the opposition and won 125 out of its 130 regularly scheduled games? So what if it swept the Series four straight? This would—or should—only inspire the other Japanese teams to play better, to play smarter, and eventually to defeat the interlopers. And a catch-up process that might take 50 years otherwise could be shortened to 10 with the added stimulus of having this superteam in the league.

Of course, I realize that is not how it would happen. I know as well as anybody else does that giving the owners free rein would result in a bidding war to sign up as much foreign talent as they could afford, and that Japanese baseball would become indistinguishable from the American major leagues. So what? All that means is that the fans would be treated to a better brand of baseball. And aspiring young Japanese baseball players would have a higher goal to shoot for and would work that much harder to be even better ball players so that some day they could play in the "big leagues." The result would be an overall improvement in the quality of Japanese baseball at every level.

This August, I served as artistic director (read instructor) for the 32nd International Conductors' Masterclass sponsored by the Netherlands Broadcasting Service Corporation in Hilversum outside Amsterdam. Having turned out such internationally famous conductors as Bernard Haitink, Gary Bertini, Eliahu Inbal and Alain Lombard, this Masterclass attracted this year 127 applications from all over the world. After screening their videos, we selected the top 27 to come to Hilversum. I then tested those 27 to narrow the field to the top eight, and gave these hopefuls two weeks of intensive instruction. After seeing how they performed, I then narrowed the class down to the top four, and had them debut by conducting the Netherlands Radio

Philharmonic Orchestra in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Hall in their third week. Their lessons and debut concerts were televised internationally.

Although there was no attempt to rank the top four, the Eduard van Beinum Foundation offers a scholarship and other help to the young conductor who seems most promising. And as artistic director for this year's program, I was delegated to appoint this person to be assistant conductor with the orchestra that would offer the best learning experience. The foundation does not care where the conductor is from or what orchestra he or she studies with. All they care about is that the person have talent and that this talent be developed to the fullest.

The Netherlands is a minor player economically, but the generous way in which it spends on this program and the way it treats all applicants equally regardless of nationality make it clear that the Netherlands is a cultural superpower.

If Japan is to have any hope of surviving, it must change its xenophobic ways, do its best to contribute to world culture, look beyond nationalities, and judge people on their human qualities. Resource-poor, Japan has managed to become economically rich. But it is still spiritually poor, and the inability to transcend narrow nationalism is at the root of the trade friction and bashing Japan has undergone. This may sound unpatriotic, but it is precisely because I care about Japan that I will keep calling upon it to transcend this myopia and to be the best it can.

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

Hiroyuki Iwaki is a leading Japanese conductor who made his international debut with the NHK Symphony Orchestra in its world tour in 1960. He is now the orchestra's chief conductor for life as well as being chief conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. He has also appeared with other leading orchestras including the Berlin, Vienna, Leningrad and Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestras. He is a noted interpreter of 20th century music.