

Move over, Beethoven

By Yukichi Amano

Hard to believe, we are already gearing up to commemorate the bicentennial of Mozart's death. Even in Japan—far from Vienna's old city walls—commemorative events are being staged with surprising frequency and the mass media are racking their brains to come up with novel twists for Mozart specials. Things have gotten to the point where it is possible to speak of "Mozart mania."

Of course, there has long been a small-but-dedicated corps of Mozart buffs in Japan, but nothing like the masses of people who are listening to Mozart today, including many people who have not even shown much interest in classical music before. This is quite a change from the poverty and loneliness that were Mozart's at the time of his death in 1791.

It is also quite a change for Japan. Japan has long been a bastion of Beethoven fandom. Japan has been an avid importer of Western music ever since the opening of the country in the late 19th century, but Beethoven has been the favorite—perhaps because there has been a natural affinity between Beethoven's music with its pursuit of perfection, its austerity, and its masculine clarity and the spirit of the newly modernizing nation as it so diligently sought to catch up with and surpass the West.

Such is not to suggest that Mozart was scorned, but so far as I know, the Mozart that the Japanese loved was the Mozart in G minor. This was the Mozart of sorrow and angst. By contrast, the wanton Mozart of *Don Giovanni*, the joyful

Mozart of *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the artless Mozart of *The Magic Flute* somehow did not fit in with the hardworking, frugal, no-nonsense Japanese mood.

Looking around, I see more people in the Beethoven mold than in the Mozart mold, and it is these Beethoven-types whom society seems to favor. This is particularly true of the Japanese in their 50s or older, and the vast majority of the population seems solidly convinced that Don Giovanni was a villain and Fidelio an upright citizen. If Japan elected a president and the election were held between a Mozart running on the Fun and Games ticket and a Beethoven on the Serious Work ticket, the Beethoven would win a walk.

Yet Japan is now in the grips of Mozart madness. Part of this, of course, is the Japanese penchant to avidly seize upon any cause for celebration, but even more, I suspect it represents a change in the Japanese character. For the last few decades, there have been more and more Papagueno-like people, and the demographic center of gravity has now shifted in their favor.

Mozart generation

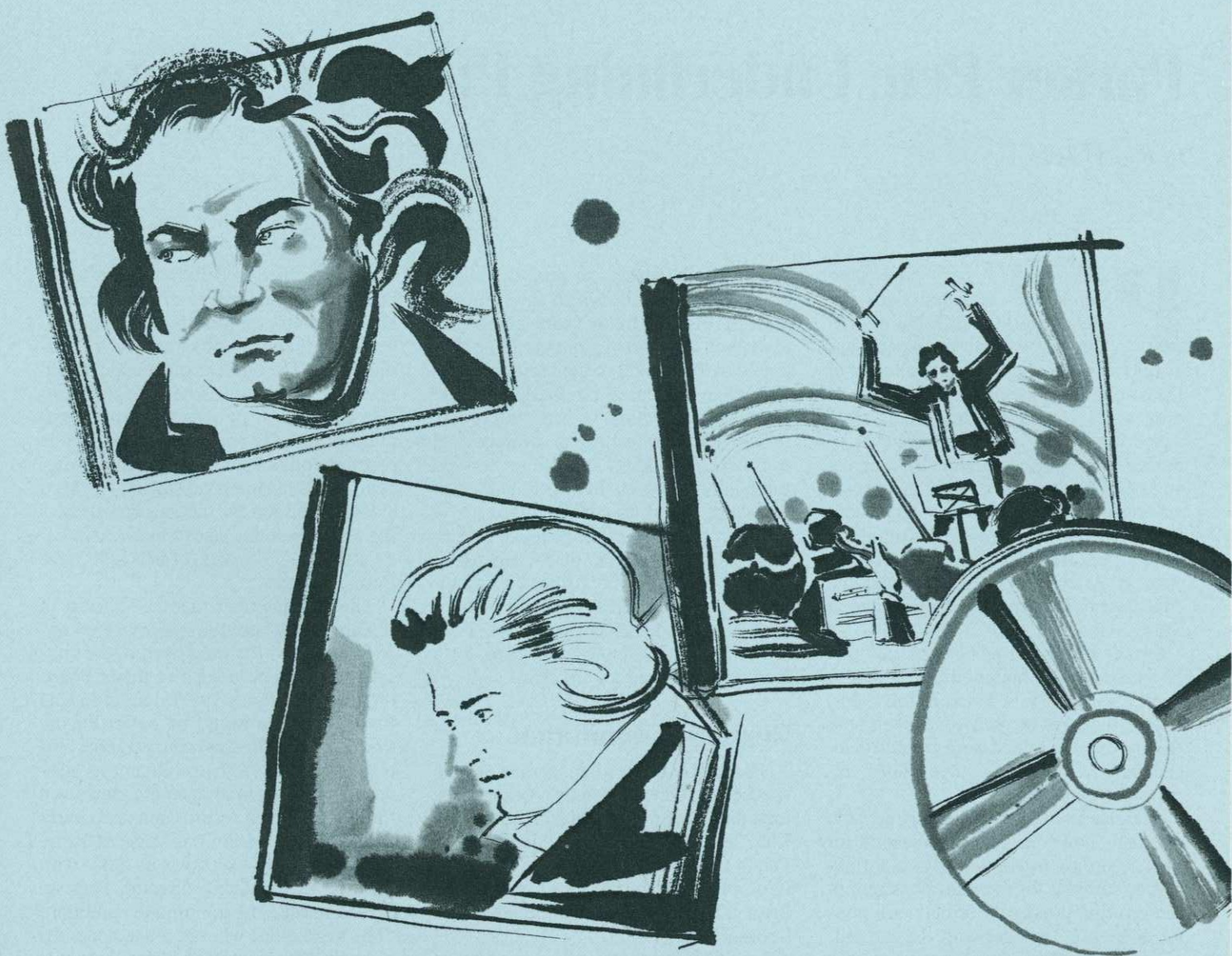
It is the postwar baby-boomers—now in their mid-40s—who have been the driving force for this change. While it is always dangerous to generalize about this very mixed-bag generation, they do have several clearly discernible personality traits. For example, they do not believe that there is only one right answer to anything. Everything, they will contend, has multiple facets, and the right answer is bound to differ depending on the eye of the beholder. Thus they have a fierce aversion to being told that such-and-such and only such-and-such is the only right answer.

Back in the 1970s, Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* was a smash hit in Japan. It was at the top of the classical hit chart for months. There were many reasons offer-



The bicentennial of Mozart's death has caused a surge of interest in Japan, featuring commemorative events and special products.

Photos: Sunbury Corp./Shin Nihon Sangyo Co.



ed for this phenomenon, but the composer Hikaru Hayashi perhaps came closest when he suggested that it was a rebellion against the incontestably just-so music that had prevailed until then. In effect, this was the first manifestation of a new generation of music lovers, people who were uncomfortable with the modern perfectionism epitomized by Beethoven.

I suspect television is at least partly responsible for this sea change. Whereas the print media have been relentless in their pursuit of truth, the broadcast media, and television in particular, have been scoffing and skeptical. Since its inception, television has been constantly exposing the fragility of the values touted by the print media. At the risk of exaggeration, it might even be argued that television has ousted Beethoven, discovered

Vivaldi, and paved the way for the current Mozart boom.

Such is not, of course, to say that Beethoven is completely out of favor. There is much of Beethoven that is neither righteous nor masculine in character, and Beethoven is himself a victim of our times due for rehabilitation at some future date. Still, Mozart is fully deserving of his current popularity.

The novelist Shohei Ooka said many years ago that people who like Mozart probably cannot stand Wagner. Just as Wagner's music is fully in and even defines the German spiritual tradition, Mozart's music defies ethnic or nationality typing. It is inconceivable that politicians would invoke Mozart's music to fan the flames of nationalism.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, listening

to Mozart, the Japanese would be moved to disregard the folly of national borders and to think of themselves as citizens of the global village. Even if that is too much to expect, we can at least hope that Mozart's gentle influence will ameliorate the all-too-common propensity to want to impose revealed truths on other people and will make the Japanese less susceptible to crusades for right and justice. ■

(This is the second of five essays by Yukichi Amano.)

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