

# Ponds and Frogs

By Takao Okamura

It was my first time outside of Japan, and I was bound for timeless Rome. Rome, cradle of civilization and home to so much great music. It was 1959—one year before the Rome Olympics—and I was off to exotic Rome to study opera with the masters.

At Waseda University, I had majored in journalism. Music had been the furthest thing from my mind, and I knew zilch about reading a score. Nevertheless, since I liked music and it looked like I would have some time, I went along at a friend's urging to try out for the glee club.

Until entering college, my life had been a bland routine of study, study, and more study. It was not that I was a particularly studious sort; it was just that everyone else was studying hard for the university entrance exams and that I knew my options would be limited in status-conscious Japan if I did not have the all-important college degree. I was studying not to get an education but to get a sheepskin.

## Breath of new life

So it was an eye-opening experience to hear the glee club. It was like a breath of new life—like opening a window on a whole new world. Looking back, I know that this was a very ordinary rehearsal by a very ordinary amateur group, but their voices rang clear in our basement practice room. It was the first time I had heard voices raised in harmony, and it seemed like the heavenly strings.

This was the first thing I had ever been able to throw myself into that I really enjoyed. From morning to night, I spent day after day practicing with the glee club. Journalism was forgotten.

And in my junior year at Waseda—just for the hell of it—I auditioned for a spot on the NHK Tokyo Broadcast Chorus. Much to everyone's surprise, I got the position. So never having held a real job in my life, I drifted happily into music as a career. At the time, the NHK Tokyo Broadcast

Chorus was Japan's best choral group, and the pay was even better than my classmates were making their first year on the job in journalism.

Not long afterward, NHK invited a world-famous Italian opera troupe on its first tour of Japan and I had the chance to practice Verdi's *Aida* with the troupe. Rather than have the whole troupe come to Japan, just the lead soloists, conductor and director had come. Japan provided the other singers from the NHK Tokyo Broadcast Chorus, the Nikikai Chorus Group and the Fujiwara Opera Chorus Group; provided the NHK Symphony Orchestra as the orchestra, and provided the props and other miscellany. It was a major effort by NHK, and the two sides cooperated to bring real opera to Japan.

Today, when Japan is counted one of the world's wealthiest countries, there is an almost endless stream of entire opera troupes coming to Japan, but this was not true of the poverty-ridden early postwar years. Today La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, the Bavarian State Opera, the Vienna State Opera, the Bolshoi Opera and all the rest are familiar faces in Japan. And this is not just the stars but entire troupes, including soloists, choruses, conductors, orchestras, ballet dancers, props, costumes, makeup people, stagehands and everything else. About the only things they do not bring with them are their theaters and their audiences.

Some people will say this is part of a love of detail and authenticity. To me, it seems to be typical of the nouveau riche bumpkin who does not want to be bothered doing anything himself but just orders one of everything. Opera should be designed and customized to each particular theater and each particular audience. It is not the sort of thing you can import wholesale.

This invitation by NHK marked the first real effort to combine Japanese and Western artists and aspects in a performing art. Coming as it did in the late 1950s, it was a landmark event. The war had

ended about a dozen years earlier, and Japan had slowly climbed out of the depths of destruction and devastation. This was by no stretch of the imagination a time of affluence, but the people finally had enough to eat and were ready to look beyond the immediate physical needs. There was a great thirst for culture, and anyone who had any pretensions at all was anxious to see the performance, to be part of the project, and to learn a little about culture from the masters. Never before or since have I seen such an avid desire to absorb Western culture in Japan.

We rehearsed at the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, and a hush fell over those present as this very big, very rotund Italian strode up from the orchestra stalls. It was almost like watching *sumo* wrestlers Konishiki or Akebono stride onto the *dohyo* ring. Looking first at this chorus of Japanese and the NHK Symphony Orchestra, he then broke into song. It was resonant. It was beautiful. How could a mere mortal have such a voice?

"*Suuu paaaaaaadre...*"

He lovingly stretched out the "*padre*" until the NHK Symphony Orchestra string players ran out of bow and the conductor Vittorio Gui stood in amazement, not even thinking to lower his baton.

## Leaving the little pond

It was more than music to my ears. It was infatuating, it was enchanting. And to think that I would only hear this magnificent voice but once if I stayed in Japan. It was too much to bear, and I resolved to leave the little pond where I had been born and to go to where the big frogs sang.

Even respected singers—some of the best soloists Japan had—threw pride to the winds and fought for a place in the chorus so they could hear the great man sing and could perhaps learn a little bit from observation. Nor was this restricted to singers. Stagehands, directors, musi-



cians and everyone else associated with the theater began showing up for rehearsals and making themselves useful. We were not so much practicing as getting free lessons.

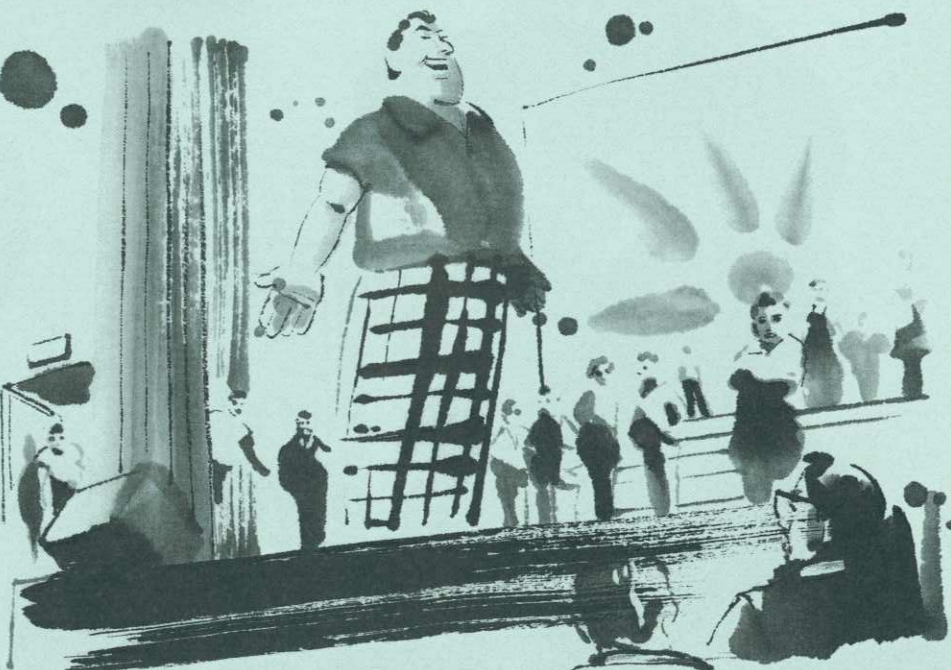
It was an exhilarating experience, but it was also a deflating one. "Shit. I may as well chuck it. If that's singing, it's clear I don't have what it takes." I was not the only one who felt that way. We were all overpowered and disheartened by this outpouring of great music. Yet as we were moping about, our conductor told us, "Get your chins up off the floor. That's no mortal man. That's the great baritone Gian Giacomo Guelfi—Italy's best. He's so good that nobody comes close to him even in Italy. He's tops. Nobody's in second or third place, and there are even arguments about whether or not anybody is in fourth. Worldwide!"

We were doing *Aida*, and Guelfi had been cast as Aida's father Amonasro—the fiercely bombastic father of the captive princess of Ethiopia.

That's the kind of singer I want to be. If I am going to be a singer, I want to be the kind that can bring tears to an audience's eyes. I've got to go to Italy. I've got to study opera at its best. My mind was made up.

Some years later, I spotted a notice in the newspaper that the Italian government had established a scholarship fund and was accepting applications from Japanese who wanted to study in Italy. This was my big chance, and I went for it. The scholarship did not cover transportation and I had to borrow that (which I was able to do because my father had just retired with a generous bonus that I sopped up), but I was soon at Haneda International Airport surrounded by well-wishers and bound for Italy.

"Take care." "Have a good trip." "Hang in." All over the departure lobby, people were saying their goodbyes and wishing their friends *bon voyage*. This kind of tearful, boisterous leave-taking is now quite rare overseas, but it still exists in Japan. An island country, Japan is not immediately adjacent to any of its neighbors. We still have the feeling that foreign lands are far-off places where everything is completely alien. And there is still the linger-



ing fear when someone leaves that we may never see them again.

Today, foreign lands are shown on television every day, and nobody even notices. But 30-odd years ago, someone setting off for a foreign land felt imbued with the frontier spirit—almost like Columbus setting off for the New World. It was a moving experience both for the people who left and for the people who stayed behind. Without doubt, everyone who left Japan felt as though he were wearing the flag on his back and going forth into the world as Mr. Such-and-such of Japan.

When someone made a name for himself overseas, we all felt proud at a local boy made good. Even though the person's being Japanese might have had nothing to do with his success or failure, we all felt proud when a Japanese succeeded and disheartened when the news was not so good. It was impossible for us to see this as the isolated successes and failures of individuals regardless of nationality. We just were not programmed that way.

For generations, Japanese had competed among themselves—this competition all the fiercer for being among friends. If the younger brother graduated from the University of Tokyo and the older brother only graduated from a sec-

ond-rate school, this was a never-ending blight on the older brother. Yet it was less painful if it were just a relative and not immediate family that had graduated from the University of Tokyo—the more distant the relative the less the shame at having been shown up. This same psychology holds even today. When all the other people in the section are showing up at work on Sundays, it is hard not to. But if it is another section, it is easy to ignore.

Even the giant trading companies see the other trading companies as their competition. Japanese newspapers compete against each other for scoops and analyses. Indeed, I suspect this fierce competition among Japanese companies has been one of the major reasons for Japan's economic success.

Thus it was that I was determined to do my best for myself and country, and thus it was that, cheered by friends and relatives, I boarded the airplane at Haneda and set off for a life of song. ■

(This is the third of five essays by Takao Okamura.)

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