

# On My Own

By Takao Okamura

In Rome, I stayed at the Collegio di Musica, a dormitory for music students. It had a magnificent marble exterior like nothing that existed anywhere in Japan, but inside it was a dormitory. My room was divided into quarters by tall old wooden cabinets with the hinges askew, each quarter having a rickety steel cot to sleep in and a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling for light. In terms of style, it was little better than a prison.

The dining hall was a cavernous communal room where we sat at long tables and, after the dorm master had arrived, were treated to soggy spaghetti and rancid mozzarella cheese. The toilets were also communal, and there were no bathing facilities. The best we had for bathing was that we were allowed to use the shower stalls at the pool next door once a week. It was probably the cheapest boarding house in Rome. But it was the best I could afford on my \$100-a-month scholarship.

Most of the other boarders at the Collegio were Italian, although there were a few Spaniards, French, Swiss and other European nationalities, some mulattos from Latin America, some Vietnamese, and me—the lone Japanese. There were 50 to 60 of us altogether.

It was the first time I had ever been plunked down in the middle of a group of non-Japanese. Looking back, it was the first and only time I really felt totally alone—that totally alone feeling that Japanese get when they are cut off from the rest of the clan. Later I lived in Europe for years and years, avoiding the colonies of Japanese and becoming quite accustomed to living among non-Japanese. In time, I even forgot to distinguish between Japanese and non-Japanese. We all, after all, are members of the same human race. But that first week was murder.

The thing I missed most was Japanese food—a bowl of rice and some broiled fish. Until then, I had lived in Japan and assumed as a matter of course that I could always get rice and fish—and such things

as *shinko* and *natto*. None of these things were available in Rome. Instead, we had pasta or bread. Dried cheese or tough meat. There was little concept of rice and a main dish to be eaten together. Instead, it was eat one thing and then eat the next thing. Once a month we were “lucky” and got a bit of scraggly roast chicken, and when this happened, everybody waited until the dorm master was seated and then broke out in a storm of sarcastic applause as if to say, “Thank you, oh kind sire, for thy bountiful blessing.”

This was the biggest change in my life—the change from rice to pasta and bread, the change from fish to meat. It was the hardest adjustment, just as I suspect the change to a different diet is the hardest adjustment for anyone to make.

## Aspiring quartet

My three roommates were all Italians. Mauro was studying the violin, Zamburini composition, and Mario was a bass like myself. Except for when he went to the dining hall to eat, Zamburini spent his days sleeping and only got up at night to lock himself in the piano practice room. Strange though it sounds, this was a very efficient schedule, since it was easier to reserve the piano room at night and there were fewer distractions.

Mauro was a violin student in name only, spending more time kicking a soccer ball or flirting with the girls than he did playing the violin. Then there was Mario—someone who could be withdrawn and depressive one moment and extrovert and sociable the next but who was blessed with such a great voice that he had little need or willingness to practice. And me.

Like the four young aspiring artists in the opera *La Bohème*—the poet Rodolfo, the musician Schonal, the philosopher Coline, and the artist Marcello—we four lived a life of austere poverty in the Collegio.

But even though we were only aspiring

we still considered ourselves artists, and we casually scorned the social mores. Even so, I was impressed at how attuned ordinary Italians were to individualistic behavior and standards, and at how much this differed from the Japanese emphasis on the group.

Determined to make my fortune and to make a triumphal return to Japan some day, I had left my toddler son in my wife's care and set off with just the \$100 monthly stipend from the Italian government. Obviously there was no way I could send any money back home and my wife had to make do on what she could earn in the choir. Very conscious of the hardship I was imposing on my wife and determined to repay this debt, I was unquestionably the hardest-working of the four.

My first task was to find a voice teacher. I wanted private music lessons. I wanted something different from the university courses with the professor standing at the front of a crowded hall. If I got a bad teacher, or even if I got a good teacher who was wrong for me, my trip halfway across the world would have been in vain.

Hearing how intently I was looking for a voice teacher, the other students in the Collegio vied to introduce me to their teachers. Luciano was a bass like myself, but his teacher was a former baritone who told Luciano to stick out his tongue and to practice projecting his voice—ah, ah, ah—every day. With gestures to make up for my lack of Italian, they explained that I had to relax my throat muscles. Roommate Mario's teacher was a performing bass. Coco, a strapping tenor who had come to the Collegio from Naples, was taking lessons from Professor Pediconi at the Academia di Santa Cecilia. And there were many more.

So I went from lesson to lesson, listening to see which one would be right for me. And of course these sample lessons were free. All of the teachers wanted students, and they were glad to let me audit their classes in the hope that I would sign





on. They put on quite a show, each trying to convince me that he or she was a peerless teacher and the obvious best choice. Some of them impressed me as little more than street performers. But this was not because they were street performers. They were educators. Still, they were rather blatant self-promoters with none of the understatement that Japanese valued.

In the end, I settled on Professor Pediconi. This made Coco very happy. But the reason I chose her was not to make Coco happy but because Pediconi did not force her own methods on her students but gradually worked on correcting what the students were doing wrong—much the same way that a sculptor might gradually chip away at a block of granite until it is a work of art. This struck a very responsive chord with me, and I did not care that she had once been a soprano.

## Virtues of harmony

I figured that if a teacher had a right to select his students, the student had a right to select his teachers. Very few of the voice teachers at Japanese music colleges have ever earned a living singing solo in a crowded theater. However, since it was only after the Meiji Restoration—less than a hundred years before I set off for

Italy—that Western music came to Japan, I suppose I should not be surprised that there are so few professional singers teaching in Japan. In fact, I may well be the first Japanese to have sung as an assigned soloist in European opera troupes.

How can someone who has never sung professionally teach people who aspire to sing professionally? How can someone who only knows what he has read in books or been told by his teachers hope to teach anything but theory?

If you wanted to teach voice at a Japanese music college, you had to be recommended by the dean or some other power broker within the faculty. The same thing is true of instrumental music. I hope this will change now that more and more Japanese have started singing professionally in Europe.

It is very difficult for someone who has never been exposed to such traditional Japanese arts as *noh*, *kabuki*, the tea ceremony and flower arrangement to say who is good and who is bad. Only when you have many years of experience in the field or have spent a long time observing it from the outside can you tell the difference.

In the two and a half centuries of Pax Tokugawa, these ancient arts were practiced by different schools, none of the schools openly vying with each other but

all the scene of fierce infighting among the disciples as the pyramidal *ie-moto* system was created, constantly refining the school's teachings. This was perhaps a natural result of the fact that Japanese were fighting with Japanese at close quarters all the while professing the virtues of harmony.

Europe was different. In Europe, people of different languages, religions and cultural heritages lived side by side. And because they did, the emphasis was on the individual rather than the group. In the arts, it was the different that stood out and was appreciated. People made a point of displaying their differences. As a result, even the novice observer felt free to express his likes and dislikes—be it in painting, in opera, or in anything else.

Thus it was that I adapted to life in Rome and became an opera singer—on my own and about as far from my Japanese roots as it was possible to get. ■

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

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