

From Entering the University to Studying in Italy

By Atsuko Azuma

Everything went as planned

My life underwent a great change during my second year of junior high school when I won first prize in a choral competition sponsored by Takarazuka Shimbun, a contest which included many adult contestants. Mrs. Ushiya, who had been teaching me piano and singing, then told me that I should look for a professional teacher. This was how I started a series of demanding music lessons which were very different from those of my training as a young lady.

I began taking voice lessons with Mrs. Fumiko Yotsuya, who was teaching at the time at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, and piano lessons with Mr. Masutaka Kanazawa, a well-known pianist in the Kansai area. In my third year of junior high school my parents were told by Mrs. Yotsuya, "Your daughter may have a small body, but she has a strong voice and has a good sense of music. Why don't you train her as a vocalist?" Mrs. Yotsuya suggested that I should take lessons from her (in Tokyo) twice a week.

It so happened that my father, who started a metal and steel materials business during the Korean War, managed to make a small fortune in Tokyo. Thinking about the future of my younger brothers and sisters he decided to move the entire family to Tokyo. And with this arrangement, I entered Atomi Gakuen High School, a prestigious girl's high school near our Tokyo home. I also began a series of private lessons, including voice training, piano, sound detection, *solfa-methode*, sight-reading, English, Italian and German.

Thanks to these lessons, my entrance examination for soprano major at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, which had an acceptance rate of one in 20, was a breeze. Come to think of it, during my preparation for the examination I was even able to find time to take many cultural lessons in my training as a woman including flower arrangement, Japanese dance, calligraphy and cooking. During this period, although I did not find time to watch television, I did learn how



to use my time effectively—a discipline that I am grateful for even today.

After I entered the university, the school of my dreams, at the age of 20 I joined an opera group formed by my teachers. Playing Frasquita and Micaela in *Carmen* as well as the leading role in *Madama Butterfly*, I traveled with the group to perform at regional schools. I even learned how to make costumes and apply makeup along the way. As a member of the university's opera group, I also learned the basics through Mozart's opera produc-

tions, such as *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*), *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), *Così fan tutte*, etc.

After graduating, I stayed on in the special study program (today's graduate school) and as part of my repertoire I went through two strict years of learning German lied, French songs and Japanese songs. For my graduation performance, I drew quite a bit of attention by performing the entirety of "Pari Ryōjo" ("Journey to Paris") written by Saburo Takada.

In the meantime, I started taking Italian

lessons from Italian priests at Himonya Catholic Church and *bel canto* lessons from Don DalFior. Because I had a good grounding in the basics, by the time I graduated from my special study program I was able to pass the examination for a scholarship offered by the Italian government. I ended up going to study in Italy.

Getting ready for Italy

In September 1961, many friends and family members came to see me off at what was then the international airport. Wearing a green silk suit and taking with me a 20-kilogram trunk and carry-on luggage, I headed for Italy. At that time, Japanese airlines didn't make international flights, so I flew SAS to Copenhagen via Anchorage and then changed planes in Copenhagen for Rome. Among the Japanese passengers who disembarked at Copenhagen, there were four men and me, the only woman.

I discovered that all five of us were staying at the same hotel that night. Since I spoke English, I was asked to call a taxi. Leaving my trunk in the care of the men, I ventured to catch a taxi.

All five of us rode in the same cab. It was after we finished with our check in procedures that I discovered that I had lost my carry-on luggage. In a rush, I went back to the airport around 3:00 in the afternoon. As I arrived at the airport police office, a red-faced, kind looking middle-age policeman was yawning. When I told him in English that I had lost my carry-on luggage, he went to get a report form while saying, "Well, this nation has no thieves, I am sure it will turn up in two, three minutes. Why don't you drink some coffee while you wait."

Ten minutes, 15 minutes and then 30 minutes had gone by. And the policeman, looking half embarrassed and half sympathetic, said: "I am sure if it is stolen, it is not the work of a Dane, but that of some foreigner. Why don't you go back and wait at your hotel." I had no choice but to return to my hotel.

That night I tossed and turned in my bed, thinking about my lost carry-on luggage. In it were the documents necessary for my overseas study, a letter addressed to the principal at Conservatorio A. Boito di Parma, a letter of introduction addressed to the head of Dame Orsoline where I was to stay, their gifts along with

the precious \$100 each person was permitted to take out of Japan.

On the third morning it was time to catch the plane for Rome. I went to the kind-hearted policeman one more time to leave my address in Italy. I asked him to notify me if my carry-on luggage was located, and left Copenhagen. Depressed by the disaster on this very first trip abroad, I hadn't paid much attention to what was going on around me. Once airborne I looked out the plane window and saw for the first time several beautiful, clear lakes which we passed. After zigzagging in among hills spotted with vineyards, my plane shot off for the airport in Rome.

Italians

The humid September sun of the southern part of the country was so intense that I couldn't be bothered with the many curious glances I was getting from Italian pedestrians. Sitting in the middle of the magnificent, thick-layered marble building of which I had dreamed many times, I was served spaghetti brought by an Italian waiter. And what a taste that was for someone who had never tasted Italian food before, something I will never forget. The spaghetti, which was covered with red tomato sauce, was so *al dente* that I kept thinking that it was merely half-cooked.

The procedure at the foreign study section of the foreign ministry in Rome went smoothly thanks to my Italian lessons. And I was much obliged to the kindness of Dr. Jannotta at the foreign study section who let me stay even though I did not have the proper documents. Dr. Jannotta had just lost his wife and was living in a huge house with just a maid. He asked me if I would seriously consider staying with him in Rome. Having just arrived from Japan two days before, I merely took this gesture to be a man's way of being polite and hurried on with my train trip to Parma.


At the train ticket window, saying that I wanted a second-class ticket to Parma, I handed the ticket seller a 10,000 lira note. The attendant, sitting on the other side of the window, smoothly put the note away in his drawer while making out the ticket. Then he handed me the ticket and said, "Signorina, that will be 7,800 lira please." I told him that I had already given him

10,000 lira, but he made a gesture that he hadn't received anything.

The train was leaving in 10 minutes. I turned and saw that there was a long line of people waiting to buy tickets behind me and realized it wouldn't help to argue with him. Begrudgingly, I handed over another 10,000 lira from my very limited funds and finally got my ticket. I dashed to the platform and barely caught the train for Milan.

It was only when the train was nearing Orvieto that I was able to forget my bad experience. Riding in an eight-person compartment for the first time I suddenly became conscious that this was the beginning of a romantic trip. It must be because I became more confident in myself and after summoning my courage and straining my voice I struck up a conversation with a middle-age woman in the same compartment and found that I could speak the language fluently enough to be understood.

I felt a sweet sense of happiness, thinking that I was going to realize what I had been reading about in *Il trionfo della morte* by D'Annunzio—a text which I had been studying while taking Italian lessons at the university. The world, which I could only imagine from reading this book, was now in front of me. I told myself, "Yes, I am really alive."

Just when the train was about to arrive in Parma, I became more and more excited in anticipation of what was to come. Waiting at Parma station, as promised, was a slim, pretty and fair-skinned nun from Dame Orsoline Convent. That evening I had an interview with Maria Tecla Berni, the head of the convent. I was given a room on the third floor of this historical, medieval-style building with a view of the middle garden. And Tecla Berni, the head sister, was soon to become my surrogate mother caring for my emotional needs. In the dim light, I followed her up the stone stairs to my room on the third floor, thus beginning my life as a foreign student. 

(Second in a six-part series)

Atsuko Azuma made her debut as an opera singer at the Reggio Emilia Municipal Theater in 1963, and then had a 20-year stage career as a prima donna in Berlin, Vienna, New York, Munich, Hamburg, Buenos Aires, Moscow, etc.