

Dormitory Life

By Atsuko Azuma

My life as a music student began in a room on the third floor of a medieval-style convent with a view of an elongated middle garden.

It was only the beginning of September, but the thick stonewalls of my room would get extremely cold between night and daybreak. Accustomed to the more temperate climate of Japan, I found the cold unbearable. Just as I began to unpack and started to get settled, I heard the sound of a large bell signaling the supper hour. I headed toward the dining hall which was in a room with an arch-shaped ceiling, a throwback to the Middle Ages. It was full of young female students who, sitting in fours at square tables, were patiently waiting for their food to be served.

I was taken to the dining hall by a young, pretty and spunky nun named Madre Donati. I am pretty sure there were about 35 students and the minute I arrived all eyes turned to me. "This is Signorina Atsuko Azuma from Japan. She will be studying music at Parma's Arrigo Boito." After the introduction, I made a bow and was escorted to a table. Seated at the same table were Dottoressa Ernestina, a pharmacology researcher working as a university assistant; Signorina Laura, who was once a princess of the Paravicini family and later became a nun; and Sig.^{na} Cecilia, a medical student from India.

For supper we first had warm soup followed by cheese, ham and salad. Tired from the long journey, I barely touched my food and shut myself in my room, staring blankly into the space on my bed. Suddenly I heard a hubbub outside my room. When I stuck my head out to see what was happening, several of the students from the dining hall started coming towards me asking me to show them my arm. Not knowing what was going on, I rolled up my sleeve and stretched an arm out. Then one of them stretched out her own arm next to mine and started comparing my sunburned arm to hers saying, "See, she is not yellow after all. She is not that different from us." Not having met any Japanese people before, somehow they all had expected Japanese people to have yellow skin.

The following day, I started going to Parma's Arrigo Boito located outside the backdoor of the convent. It was also built in medieval style; the middle garden was surrounded by corridors and arches and in the middle of the carefully manicured lawn was a bust of Toscanini, who also attended this school. To take the entrance examination I passed through the school gate. I remember looking at the high noses and large, stern eyes of the 12 examiners. I was so nervous I was scared out of my wits.

Sempre deve essere l'artista

Now that I think of it, my choice of songs was totally absurd. I chose "Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore" from *Tosca* and "Voi lo sapete, O mamma" from *Cavalleria rusticana*, both aria parts. After I finished singing two more Italian classics, I was so nervous I almost couldn't find the exit. As I was sitting in the waiting room, a small-frame, red-faced examiner came and put his hand on my shoulder, saying, "We have decided to have you study singing with me from tomorrow. Signorina, come to this room tomorrow at 8:30 a.m. but don't bring anything with you." After saying that, he left.

This gentleman turned out to be Professor Avanzini, head of the vocal music department. The vocal exercises I had every other day were very much like muscle training in basic physical exercise, designed to open up one's vocal cords. And gradually, I was able to sing in a legato style, my voice soft and tender.

Being an Oriental, comprehension of "vibrations of the voice" as part of Italian tradition definitely did not come easy to me. I had difficulty gaining an in-depth understanding and appreciation for Latin classics. Still, the teachers at Parma's Arrigo Boito tried their best to teach me the real *bel canto* singing technique.

In addition to singing, the curriculum included *canto chorale* (choir), *solfa-methode*, piano, music history, Italian, etc. All were very difficult. But among them, the time spent on theatrical arts left the strongest impression on me. The teacher

was the once famous soprano Miss Tess, who, at the time, was already 73. Still, she had a pair of beautiful, blue eyes that gave an almost piercing glance and a head of once beautifully golden hair which she had kept long, in a permanent and bundled up smartly in the back. She was an upright, medium-sized woman with an air of coolness.

To me the character roles which I was able to create under her instructions were a precious heritage which nothing can change. Not only did I learn marvelous theatrical philosophy, I remember she once told me, "You are Japanese. While having confidence and pride for your culture, you should try to approach other cultures as well. What's more, you should always be an artist—'sempre deve essere l'artista'." Her words were gifts and something that I hold dear even today.

The home of operas

Time flew by quickly. In the first fall I spent in Italy, I was so busy I did not even have the time to get sentimental. I also saw several stage performances. On the evening of December 11, when I celebrated my 25th birthday, I saw Maria Callas' *Medea* from the balcony of Teatro Scala. There, for the first time, I felt a blazing flame driven by a powerful individual character. I also dreamt that I, too, was about to catch on fire.

After New Years I saw a masquerade at the Opéra in Paris. I was fascinated by the songs of Regis Crespin. At Reggio Emilia's Teatro Municipale, I found Rosanna Cartelli, who performed in *La Traviata*, beautiful and overflowing with an air of refinement. I also remember the famous Ginlietta Simionato who sang in *La Favorita* played at Teatro Scala, which is still being handed down today.

Most of all, I can never forget the cold night of January 10, when *La Bohème* was played by Renata Tebaldi at Parma's Imperial Theater. Although the announcer mentioned that her voice was not in the greatest shape that night, still, I was totally bewitched by the singing of this soprano. Her style, technique and the clear vibrations of her voice deeply captured



the story of the opera, and to me all had been just perfect.

After the show, without thinking, I imprudently went to her dressing room and asked her how she came to be blessed with such a beautiful voice. Smiling, she gently said, "I am much obliged to my all-mighty teacher Campgalliani." It was at that time that I decided to knock on the door of this Grande Maestro of Mantova. Come to think of it, the impact this grand teacher had on me was as great as that of Miss Tess.

Due in part to the recommendations of

this maestro, I decided to take part in the Viotti International Competition held in Vercelli. That was after I finished my summer training and shortly after I returned to Parma in the beginning of October 1962. The competition lasted for five days. Among the 80 contestants, about 30 were soprano. The Americans and Eastern Europeans, all quite well built, were very serious. As a whole, the Americans really had their basics down and had good stage manners. (Speaking of stage manners, whether referring to one's costume or attitude, it has to do with one's

education and the character hidden within—something, surprisingly, very few people are able to display. I wonder why that is.)

For the preliminary competition I sang the aria part of Susanne in *The Marriage of Figaro*. For the semi-final competition I sang an aria from *Luise*, and for the final competition, I once again sang an aria from *Madama Butterfly*. There was no I first prize winners, but I did win second. I couldn't understand, there were several contestants who far surpassed me in volume as soprano...

When I left Vercelli, the judges recommended that I participate in the Achille Peri International Competition to be held in Reggio Emilia in November. I was told that a theatrical debut contract was part of the winning prize.

Although I had dreamed of becoming an opera singer, I never thought it a possible goal. I was full of mixed emotions. It was only at the beginning of that very year that I had seen Rosanna Cartelli, the woman who totally bewitched me in *La Traviata*. When I learned that I was to compete at the same theater where that opera was staged, I kept thinking how very unreal the whole thing was.

On November 15, after four days of judging, I won the competition. And the following February, I was to debut as Suzel in *L'Amico Fritz* by Pietro Mascagni. Somehow, things were starting to happen to me outside of my control.

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