

# Busy Going Nowhere

By Hiroyuki Iwaki



For the past 20 years, I have spent an average of only about three months a year in Japan. Moreover, these three months are spread out over numerous short visits, sometimes well over 10 a year. The rest of the time, I am plying my trade in Europe, America or Australia. And since I am in and out of Japan so often and have so little time here, I am very busy when I am here.

Being affiliated with many musical organizations in Japan, I have a full year's worth of work to do and only three months to do it in. I do not just conduct, but I also attend conferences, serve on a variety of awards committees, judge musical competitions, sit on the board of the Japan-DDR Culture Association . . . The list goes on and on. There are days when my schedule goes from 10 in the morning until well past midnight, with every minute accounted for.

## Time to relax

Yet outside of Japan, I am just a conductor working with the local orchestra and free of most of these other obligations. This allows me time to relax and read, time that I find I do not have in Japan. There are some obligations that I cannot escape from, such as my writing commitments to half a dozen different Japanese magazines, each with its own schedule and deadlines that have to be met, but even so, I find that my schedule is much more relaxed overseas than it is in Japan.

Whenever I am in Japan for a week or so between European concerts, I am constantly watching the clock and pressed for time. Not long ago, for example, someone I had met in Hamburg called to say he had been reassigned back to Tokyo. "Why don't we get together for dinner?" "Well," I had to answer, "tomorrow's out, and I'm booked solid the day after tomorrow. How about the day after that. I've got an hour open from 10:15 to 11:15 that night. The hotel bar?" Even over the phone, I

could tell his feelings were hurt. It was as if I were glad to be his friend when I was in Hamburg but did not want to be seen with him in Tokyo.

However, it is just that I have more time to socialize when I am overseas. There, I might spend a whole week in one place, the first five days normally spent in rehearsal with the orchestra, which means I would only be working from 10 in the morning to one, or possibly as late as four, in the afternoon. The rest of the day I am free to do what I want. So I can understand why a friend who only knew me under those circumstances would think I was snubbing him when I told him I could only fit him in for an hour, late at night, three days later. This taught me a lesson, and recently I have made a point of not telling Japanese I meet overseas, "Let's get together in Tokyo," because I know I will not have time to get together in Tokyo.

It is just as bad when people just want to "stop by for a few minutes." The other day I got a phone call from someone I had done a favor for. "I would like to come by to say thank you. What time tomorrow would be convenient?" "Oh no, please don't bother. This phone call is quite enough. I was glad to help and I'm delighted that things are going so well for you." "But I insist on thanking you in person."

This was a particularly hectic day, and I had already spent more time that I could spare on the phone with him. And now he wanted me to take another 30 minutes of my time while he thanked me in person. No thanks. It may be considered rude to thank someone over the telephone in Japan, but I prefer it that way. Very bluntly, I am busy enough as it is, and the nicest way to thank me is to make

your thanks as brief as possible. What is the telephone for, anyway? Sometimes I am amazed at how impractical my fellow Japanese can be.

Conferences can also be especially frustrating. Even on the rare occasion when everybody gets there on time, the meeting is usually mostly idle conversation, and rarely is there more than five minutes spent discussing anything of importance. This gets on my nerves, and I often have the urge to stand up and shout, "If this is all we are going to do, why do we have to waste an hour of everybody's time calling this meeting? We could have settled this with just a few phone calls and skipped all this party chatter."

## Wasted hours

Of course, it is possible that all the meetings I go to are like this because I am mostly involved with the entertainment crowd, who are not your typical businessmen. But I doubt it. This wasted hour at a useless meeting is especially painful when I am only going to be in Japan for three or four days. When I add in my minimum of seven hours of sleep each night, the lost hour seems even more precious.

Despite—or perhaps because of—my busy schedule, I take a full month of vacation every summer, and another two weeks in the winter. Americans and Europeans might consider even that insufficient, but with all my commitments, I would be hard-pressed to take any more than this. In fact, it is only in the last 10 years that I have been able to take even this much vacation. My American and European managers had no objections to these long vacations, but I encountered a lot of opposition from my Japanese manager.

When I was younger, I used to take my vacations in different countries around the world, but I find I relax better in Japan now. I own a summer house in the highlands about 150 kilometers, or a two-hour train ride, from Tokyo where I can go to read, play golf, and otherwise get away from the hustle and bustle of work. When I first started taking these month-long hiatuses, my manager would constantly find little bits and pieces of work for me to do, and I would just as constantly refuse to let him ruin my vacation.

"It won't hurt for you to come to Tokyo just for a couple of days, will it? Afterwards, you can go back on vacation for four days, and then come down to Tokyo to do this other little job..." He is a classic case of the notorious Japanese workaholic, and he just could not understand my consistent refusal.

To me, a vacation is a long stretch of time where I do not even have to think about work, so doing a little work once a week means it is no longer a vacation. Even my manager finally got the message after two or three years of my stubbornly refusing to work during my vacation—or maybe he just got frustrated and gave up. The trend to longer vacations has been slow to catch on in Japan, but it is now an "in" thing to do. However, seen in terms of Euro-American customs, the Japanese still seem to be somewhat masochistic in their lack of vacations.

From my perspective as a Japanese who spends very little time in Japan, the typical Japanese appears to work continuously throughout the year. But I sometimes think the Japanese are busy just to maintain an appearance of being busy, as in the hour-long conferences that only do five minutes of work.

Such is not to disparage the value of hard work. I appreciate Japan's present prosperity, and I know it would not have been possible for such a small and crowded country to survive without hard work. The Japanese are hard workers, and it is easy to see why Japan has the largest foreign currency holdings in the world. So I do not underestimate the value of hard work. I simply want to suggest that maybe the Japanese should reexamine the way they work. The rest of the world

complains that the Japanese work too hard, and the Japanese react by asking what is wrong with working hard. My point is that Japanese could start taking long vacations and still maintain their present productivity by stopping these unnecessary visits, making their conferences shorter and otherwise working more efficiently.

It seems to me that the rest of the world looks down on the Japanese not for their accomplishments but for working all the time. There are also many workaholics in the United States and Europe. In fact, many of my Western acquaintances are far busier than any Japanese that I know. Yet they also seem to be much more relaxed and easygoing. They work hard, but they also play hard. When they take vacations, they are for a month or two at a time. If the Japanese would just take the vacations that they have earned and quit spending so much unproductive time at work, the world's antipathy toward Japanese "worker-ants" would probably subside. Otherwise, this teeming mass of people who never stop working will only continue to attract criticism.

## Intensity and speed

When you watch professional baseball in Japan, the players always seem to be in high gear and making an all-out effort. In contrast, America's major league athletes somehow appear to play a much more relaxed game. The batter hits the ball along the third base line, the third baseman casually fields it, seemingly with plenty of time to spare, and throws the batter out at first. It is almost like watching the game in slow motion. However, having played baseball in high school, I know the game, and I know that American major league ball players are very fast runners and very hard throwers. So why do Japanese players look so much more rushed? Is it because the Japanese field is smaller? While the distance to the outfield fence in Japanese baseball parks is still considerably less than it is in American baseball parks—which is why some avid American baseball fans do not recognize Sadaharu Oh's world home run record—the distance between the bases is

exactly the same in Japan as it is in America. There has to be some other reason Japanese infielders seem to have to hurry so to throw runners out. And it is definitely not because Japanese players are faster than their American counterparts.

The reason is that American baseball players perform the fundamentals so well. They hit, field and throw so well that they make it look easy. In Japan, on the other hand, the athletes must make up for their lack of speed and power through pure hustle—making the game look more difficult, and themselves more skillful, than is really the case.

I know I have digressed from the original subject of business, but if Japanese could work the same way the extremely hard-working Americans and Europeans I have mentioned do—if they could take long vacations and approach their work with the intensity and speed of major league baseball—then their unsavory reputation as workaholics would be at least somewhat diluted. On the other hand, if Japan continues to skip vacations and to work nonstop year-round, spinning its wheels in unproductive meetings and other inefficient practices, it will just continue to evoke animosity from the rest of the world. If the Japanese people would just work the same as people do in other countries, then those other countries would have no cause for complaint even if Japan is more successful than they are. At least this is the way it looks to me—someone who spends a lot of time looking at his own country from the outside. ■

(This is the third of six essays by Mr. Iwaki.)

*Hiroyuki Iwaki is a leading Japanese conductor who made his international debut with the NHK Symphony Orchestra in its world tour in 1960. He is now the orchestra's chief conductor for life as well as being chief conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. He has also appeared with other leading orchestras including the Berlin, Vienna, Leningrad and Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestras. He is a noted interpreter of 20th century music.*