

My Birth

I was born in 1953 in Nagoya City in Aichi prefecture. It was a cold snowy day in February. I was delivered as a breech baby, but I grew up healthy and even now work without any health or physical problems.

Back then, Nagoya was a relaxed rural town. There were farms around my house and I used to catch crayfish, tadpoles, dragonfly larvae and so on, when I was a small child. There were ample places to play back in those days, and I was fortunate to be raised in such a peaceful environment.

Crybaby Girl

“You were such a crybaby. I would never have imagined that you would become a conductor,” my kindergarten teacher once said to me. I was a crybaby when I was a little child. My grandmother had always been with me, and that was probably why I became such a spoiled child.

Inside my house, I was very active and comical. But once I got out and entered a group of other children, I became quiet and could not express my opinions. I cried a lot in kindergarten, being bullied by boys. I ended up attending my kindergarten for only about half of my school term.

Soon, I started learning the piano, and learned to express my will. I remember that I often cried when my piano teacher scolded me because I could not move my fingers as I wanted. But I never stopped taking piano lessons, no matter how often my teacher scolded me. That was because I was more proud of myself playing the piano than because I liked music.

In my elementary school I often accompanied the chorus on the piano during music classes. I also had a piano recital every year, so I have experienced nervousness to perform on the stage ever since I was a child.

Every day, when I returned home from school, I would practice the piano for one hour. This hour of practice made me distinct from other children. I would put my satchel aside and stare at the clock to practice the piano for one hour. After practicing the piano for exactly one hour, I would close the keyboard cover, and then I would go outside to play for the rest of the afternoon until dinner time as my free time. Being an honest child, I kept this rhythm of practice without protest. As I look back now, the daily custom of repetition was beneficial.

There was one thing that I was not fond of. That was school lunch. When I was really little, I became picky and especially did not care for meat at all. My particularity over food was so great that everyone wondered how I had enough to keep alive. It was painful that I had to finish eating the food I disliked on my plate. Several times, I even left school early by pretending to be sick when I saw my least favorite food on the list for lunch. I cannot believe it, thinking of my

eating habits today. I want to declare this: a person's eating habits change quickly once the person starts drinking.

In the fall of the year when I entered elementary school, an extremely strong typhoon, called *Isewan*, hit Nagoya. A heavy flood destroyed nearby embankments and left five thousand people dead. Houses were flooded and the water did not subside for one month. During that time, my sister and I temporarily stayed at my relative's house. I do not clearly remember my school days at the house or how scary the typhoon was.

Throughout my elementary school and junior high school years, I was a member of the student committee in my class. My mother describes my character by saying, "You liked to be the king of the mountain." I liked to care for other people, but I did not like it when my opinion was not agreed with.

Along with piano lessons, Ms. Masami Hayakawa, my piano teacher, taught me other fundamental music lessons in my early childhood, such as aural comprehension, solfeggio and music grammar.

For the piano lessons, I practiced a lot before each lesson. But I did not have to prepare for the other lessons. I especially liked the lessons for aural comprehension and solfeggio more than the piano lessons, and I was good at those lessons. I also was more interested in purchasing a new music score and playing the piece on the piano, than practicing lesson drills. My curiosity, so, was gradually turned toward orchestral compositions.

My High School Days and then University

As I was preparing for entering high school, I was planning to go to a high school specializing in music. Then I decided to go to a regular high school, after realizing that my piano skills were not good enough. I did not worry about the change, because I knew that eventually I would pursue my path to be a musician. I was able to enter the Meiwa High School, which is a top ranking academic high school in Nagoya.

Most of the students were male students. One class was made up of 47 students and there were only about ten female students in the class, all geared for college examinations. Yet, the school spirit was free, and I have many fun memories. Even in high school, male students called me, “Boss.” That was not because I was a gang leader. That was because many male students skipped cleaning the classroom, and I would chase them and make them do their chores. In the midst of students who were not related to music at all, I would often deceive my teacher’s eyes and secretly study music harmony during the class.

There were students who liked classical music in the school, and we exchanged records and talked about music performances. Nearly 20 years after graduation, they are good friends of mine, and they are the key figures that found a group in Nagoya who supports me. I trust them very much. So, my days in a high school that was not specialized in music have been positive to my career.

I have had many detours in my life, so much that at times I even questioned why I was going further away from the path toward my goal. These detours were actually given by God, so that I could eventually become a conductor. But I did not know it then, while taking such detours. It was also the case when I was preparing to enter university. I had been hoping, desiring, and planning to enter the Tokyo University of the Arts. I ended up failing the 1st round examination for its musicology department. The same year, I took and passed the entrance examination for the Department of Music Education at Ochanomizu University, a women’s university.

I would not have become a conductor if I had not entered this university. Looking

back now, that was also my fate. However, my heart had been always toward the Tokyo University of the Arts. Once in a while, I would secretly audit some classes there. I could hear the sounds of all kinds of musical instruments. I was envious of the environment of this school. I kept thinking, "Someday I will pass through the Ueno Park. I will study at this university."

Encounter with Michel Polnareff

One day, my younger sister came back home with a record she had rented. The record had the theme music of a French movie, *It Only Happens to Others*. Carelessly I played the album. The moment I heard the music, my body was electrified. I wonder how many times I repeated listening to this 2-3 minutes song. I was completely drawn to the harmony of the song, which was written with G Minor, my favorite key.

That was my first encounter with Michel Polnareff, a French singer song writer. Then I began purchasing many of his albums. In those days, French pop music was very popular in Japan. I wanted to study French so that I could understand lyrics of his songs. I had been studying German at the university and had also been mainly studying German composers, such as Beethoven and Brahms. Suddenly, the direction was turned around.

I began interested in French classical music, such as Debussy and Ravel, and I wanted to become a singer song writer like Michel Polnareff. I actually wrote several songs, though I could not write good ones.

I once went to the backstage room at his live concert in Japan without any appointment and had him write his autograph for me. His poster hung on the wall in my room, and every day I would look at the poster with adoration before going out of the room. I dreamed of going to France someday to meet him.

I had been studying Mahler, an Austrian composer, since my high school days, and I had been determined to write a graduation thesis on him at university. Somehow then, I started thinking about studying French Music with an unexpressive urge. If I had not had the encounter with Michel Polnareff, I would not have thought of going to France to study, nor even of entering the Besançon competition.

Tricked by Fate

Ochanomizu University had its annual fall school festival, and the junior students at the Music Department had an opera performance during the festival. It was completely planned, prepared and performed by the students. Together they would spend one year taking time carefully to build up the project. They would choose the program, hire a stage director and an orchestra, and make stage sets by themselves.

In my junior year, we raised the question about the programs that had been performed before. Many of them were from or before the classical period, such as Mozart and Pergolesi, and some of the roles were difficult to be performed by women only. So we chose *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (The Child and the Spells), composed by Ravel.

We concluded that this opera would be fine for us women to perform, because lifeless objects played some roles in the opera. But we selected a modern composer that we had never played before, and the music was very difficult to sing or perform. Somehow we managed to arrange the full orchestral piece that Ravel had composed for a smaller ensemble with 2 pianos, 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, 1 fagot, 1 horn, strings and percussion. That must have been such a fearless arrangement.

We also translated its lyrics written in French into Japanese by ourselves. Thanks to Michel Polnareff, I had gained much knowledge of French by then. I had also read many books on orchestration, and I had been thinking of arranging songs. I would never have dreamed that my interest in French pop music would later become useful.

Our class talked with each other and smoothly chose what piece to be performed. Then we lost our unity when we began choosing the cast for the roles to play. Each of my classmates, about 10 in number, thought she was good at singing. I wanted to sing, too. And no one else was willing to conduct. I was the only one who knew anything about orchestration. So, really there was no other way than for me to accept the post of conducting.

“Who would not sing on the opera stage?” I thought. I had trouble understanding why I had to conduct in the orchestra pit instead. No one knew that this would be the crucial point of my fate.

We invited the students from the Tokyo University of the Arts and the members of amateur orchestras in regular universities to form an orchestra for the festival. These members had had much experience in orchestral performance, while I was just learning to conduct. Yet they really followed me. I also had many lessons to learn from them. I had a first-hand practical training of orchestral conducting with them.

Whenever I heard of an opera performance, I went to see its rehearsal. I asked the conductor for permission to see a rehearsal so that I could actually watch with my eyes how to conduct opera music. I had been not able to conduct well, but I knew for sure what to express musically from this piece by Ravel.

I thought to myself, “Well, I don’t know how to conduct, but I can still communicate with the orchestra through my words.” So I spent days studying the music scores intensively. I liked this Ravel’s piece so much that I could even skip a meal to study it. It was at this time when I realized how fun it was to conduct opera music.

Looking back, what a fearless thing I was doing! I spent that year with one single passion to make the opera successful. Some of the orchestra members for the festival are today active in professional orchestras, and once in a while we run across each other at concerts. They were at the defining moment when I began conducting by accident. We still reminisce about it. And even now those classmates at Ochanomizu University cheer me on as active members of the group in Tokyo that support my career.

Without my opportunity to conduct the opera, I would not have chosen my path to be a conductor. So I always remind myself, “Keep in mind how you began.”

Apprentice in Conducting

Though I became interested in conducting, I had no idea how to study it. So, I decided to visit the Tokyo University of the Arts and to ask the students for advice.

I asked them what would be necessary to enroll in the Department of Conducting at the university. I found out that, in addition to playing the piano and *solfeggio*, there would be a test called score reading, which was to look at an orchestral score and play it on the piano. And of course, there would be a test of conducting.

A candidate would conduct with a pianist or a small orchestra. No woman had been enrolled in the Department of Conducting at the Tokyo University of the Arts before. I worried a lot, wondering if the school would allow me, a woman, to enter the department.

I was about to graduate from one university. I hesitated in pursuing another school to study, for fear of taking a challenge of a new subject without knowing my future. As a woman I worried that it would delay any future marriage. But my mother gave me a crystal clear answer when I asked her for advice. “You do not know anything unless you try it, so why don’t you take the entry examination for the university? If you pass it, you can pursue your path as a conductor. If you do not pass it, it would not be too late to think about another path from there.” My worries instantly disappeared when I heard her advice.

With no time for indecisiveness, I had myself introduced to Professor Ken-Ichiro Kobayashi, a maestro conductor. I visited him on the day I turned 21. With nervousness, I told him that I was interested in entering the Department of Conducting at the Tokyo University of the Arts, and wanted to see if he would accept me as his private student. He allowed me to be his student, saying, “I will drop you as soon as you become tardy.” His lessons were strict. I had had many music lessons before, but no other lessons had made me as nervous as his. This strictness was actually good for me. I went with him and observed his orchestra rehearsals, every one of them. I was truly fortunate to be able to closely watch his conducting techniques, his methods of rehearsing, his attitude as a conductor, and his understanding of the essence of music.

When I visited his house for my 2nd lesson, I saw a list of programs covering the walls. That was the list of the Budapest International Conductors' Competition. Shortly after, he entered and won the competition, and returned to Japan. As a super star conductor, he continued busy schedule, which kept him from giving me lessons. So, I just accompanied him wherever he went. When my entrance exam for the university was just around the corner, he left for Hungary.

Entrance Exam for Tokyo University of the Arts

I am not a “tough person.” But a certain episode follows me whenever I face a crucial moment. It happened when I took the entrance examination for the Tokyo University of the Arts.

Ten applicants were taking the examination for the Department of Conducting in 1975, and I was the only female student among them. The department admits two students every year, but there are times when no student is admitted. I had studied hard for one year after I decided to apply for the university.

While all my senior year classmates were in high spirits, ready for graduation, I was preparing for the entrance examination with the high school textbooks that I had pulled out, in addition to working on my graduation thesis and the graduation piano recital.

In nervousness, I faced the 1st round examination. At the 1st examination, besides taking tests on aural comprehension and solfeggio, I conducted a Haydn’s symphony with a pianist. When I stood on the conductor stand, professors who were present as proctors instructed me to ignore the repeat sections and play to the end. Just as I had been told, I was conducting when the pianist repeated a section by mistake. Out of my nervousness, I heard myself yelling loudly, “You said that I was not supposed to repeat!” I cannot imagine my face when I was yelling. It just happened. I was convinced that I had failed the examination. And I went home while being shocked. Somehow, however, I passed the examination. Amazingly I was the only student admitted to the Department that year. After entering the university, Professor Akeo Watanabe, a teacher I deeply respect, said to me, “During the entrance examination, you rebuked us proctors because we had made the mistake of repeating. The punch that you showed convinced us that a woman could become a conductor. That was the reason why you passed the exam.”

Years have passed since then. But Professor Watanabe often talked about this episode in front of other people. Embarrassed, I just kept standing next to him, lowering my head.

Wonderful Musician Friends

Yoshikazu Tanaka and Hiroyuki Odano were enrolled the year after I came to Tokyo University of the Arts. Another year later Kazushi Ono came to the university. They came to the Department of Conducting fresh from high school, and all of them were excellent students.

These three and I were together all the time. We went to see rehearsals together, and drank together. We spent lots of time discussing music. That was so good. We would go to “Setouchi,” a bar where university students hung out, and would talk till late in the evening.

The owner of “Setouchi” invited us to ski at the resort in Myokoo Kogen. We decided to set up a skiing tour trip among the students at the Department of Conducting, and 5 or 6 of us went there. Some of us who had never skied before almost fell off a cliff. So we took off our skis and played on sleds. That was such a delightful tour trip. After skiing, we had fun drinking in the evening, which was perhaps the true reason for the tour. This annual ski tour continued for several years. Then each of us went abroad and we could not make skiing plans any longer. The skiing tour died out.

Moving

University students move from one residence to another all the time. Students at the Department of Conducting helped each other when someone moved. In one such case, Yoshikazu Tanaka, my study fellow, decided to move, so we went to help. At the time, he was living near my residence. Since the Department was occupied by men, I thought my role would be preparing lunch. I made and brought dozens of rice balls and side dishes.

Most of his belongings in his tiny room were a piano, which was necessary for his study, and music scores. I remember that I washed the bathroom tiles while the men carried heavy things.

When we had a short break, someone brought out a music score without any intention, and we began talking about it. Soon, looking into the score, all of us were engaged in a conversation of conducting with zeal, while playing the piano. We could not help putting the moving aside and being enthusiastic about our discussion, because everybody there was studying to become a conductor. When the conversation was over, we noticed that it had already become dark outside.

Art Festival

Tokyo University of the Arts has an annual art festival. It is a festival for the students. Not only do students exhibit performances, but they also open some booths for the festival. The students of the Department of Conducting take this opportunity to organize a special orchestra to perform.

One year, I made the suggestion that we should plan an event that would be different from doing an ordinary performance. We decided to plan a competition for conductors. The students of the department would judge conductors. They would also play some instruments in the orchestra, since each of the students had been taking lessons of those instruments as minor subjects. The beginning part of Beethoven's 5th Symphony was chosen as the program for the competition. Visitors or any students but the Department of Conducting could enter the competition and conduct with the orchestra.

Kazushi Ono acted as the concertmaster of the orchestra. He dramatized concertmaster's movements, though not violin performance. I also sat in the first row of the second violins and played. We were very egocentric in the orchestra because, when we made a minor mistake, we would look back and complain to other students who were majoring in the instruments.

A student of the Department of Traditional Japanese Music won the competition. He received applause when he stood on the conductor stand in his *haori* and *hakama*. Perhaps it was the first and the last event when the students of the Department of Conducting gathered to play instruments.

Our student lives were free and bonded with warm friendship. And as rivals we acted vigorously in all things to sharpen techniques, and to master music.

All of those friends whom I studied with are active as outstanding conductors, today.

Audition for Gunma Symphony Orchestra

Shortly after being advanced to the graduate school in the university, I entered the competition for conductors by the Min-On Concert Association. It was the only competition for conductors in Japan, and I had signed up for it before. I was able to advance to the 2nd round, but not to the final round. The result discouraged me for a while.

In those days, I had many opportunities to conduct amateur orchestras, and I also had accompanied Mr. Ikuma Dan as an assistant conductor for his opera, *Yuuzuru* (Twilight Crane) with the Nikikai Opera Foundation. Student as I was, I was busy running around for rehearsals.

One day I heard at school that the Gunma Symphony Orchestra was going to have an audition for a conductor for its music school. The conductor and the orchestra would visit and perform at elementary and junior high schools in Gunma Prefecture. The orchestra would hire only one conductor, so this audition would be quite challenging. It was around the ski season, so the students at the Department of Conducting were deciding whether they should go skiing or take the audition.

We remarked jokingly, “Let’s take the audition but not seriously. The location is in Takasaki City, so when we fail the audition, we can go skiing directly in the Niigata area.” As I had expected, about 10 men came for the audition and I was the only woman. Giving up my hope to be accepted, I stood in front of the orchestra.

When I stood on the conductor stand, something happened within me, and I ended up rehearsing the music seriously as a completely different person. After the audition, I returned to Tokyo without thinking about its result. One day, about two months later, I received an unexpected phone call from the Gunma Symphony Orchestra, inviting me to work with the orchestra. I had completely forgotten about the audition. When I was told that the orchestra was having a rehearsal in April right away, I was filled with both joy and fear to conduct a professional orchestra. It made me happy that the orchestra accepted a woman.

For the next year, until I left for France to study abroad, I conducted many concerts with the orchestra, and increased my repertoire. That was my amazing learning experience. It was with the Gunma Symphony Orchestra that I conducted Dvořák's *From the New World*, which was not often performed in a concert, and Beethoven's 5th *Symphony* that I had not played before.

When the news that I had won the Besançon Competition came to the orchestra, the members were jubilant and posted the press-cutting on the bulletin board. When I visited Takasaki after returning from France, they were right in the middle of rehearsing *From the New World*. As I listened to this piece with reminiscence, I began remembering the year when the orchestra coached me as a graduate student. I was moved to tears.

Dream to Study Abroad

Those who study Western music admire European nations, and they dream to study abroad at European cities. Just like others, I wanted to study abroad someday when there was an opportunity.

Students majoring in music often study abroad in Berlin or Vienna. Especially students who want to be conductors naturally want to study at those places where the Berlin Philharmonic or Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra performs. But I wanted to study at Paris, because I wanted to study French music.

I was interested in orchestras such as Orchestre de Paris and Orchestre national de France, so Paris would have been the only option for me to study. During my stay in Paris, my fellow students at the music school often asked me why I had come to Paris because it was so rare for students from other nations to study music in Paris.

One day I was talking about studying abroad with a friend of mine who gave me information about a scholarship program by the Rotary International. Without wasting any time, I asked the organization to send me information, and became busy running around to gather documents. I remember that only one week was left until dead line.

Hayashi Hospital was near the house where I was born in Nagoya. The chief doctor of the hospital, Dr. Takeo Hayashi, was a school doctor at the kindergarten I attended. Dr. Hayashi was also a committee member who was in charge of selecting the student for the scholarship in the South East region of Nagoya Rotary Club, so I immediately visited him to learn more about the scholarship. When he told me that Mrs. Sadako Ogata was the first recipient of the scholarship, I realized this study abroad program was very historic and prestigious.

I had to write required documents in French, and I panicked because I had no time. I contacted Professor Ichiro Saito, my French professor at the university. He translated most of the documents into French for me. Without his help, I would not have been able to study abroad, so I am absolutely thankful for his help.

Having passed the test for studying abroad, I was selected as the grant recipient of the Rotary Club in the South East region of Nagoya to study in France. That was the beginning of hard work. First I had to learn to speak in French. Since I had studied French for a long time, I knew how to write and read in French, but I could not talk. At once I began learning conversational French at Athénée Français, a language school in Tokyo. The class was hard, but I enjoyed learning French, my favorite language.

In addition to studying the field of specialization, the grant recipients of the Rotary Club are required to attend gatherings of local Rotary clubs in the country where the recipient is sent, and to represent Japan. A Rotary club in France, called *Taverny*, was going to welcome me. Mr. Robin was going to be my counselor.

His wife, Mrs. Jacqueline Robin, was teaching at the Paris Conservatory and was also active as a pianist. When I was in Paris, the couple allowed me to observe music classes in the city, and took me to various recitals. Among all, I was deeply moved when they introduced me to the wife of a French composer, Darius Milhaud, and she asked me to perform as many of his compositions as possible in Japan.

It is quite strange that we Japanese people do not know much about our culture and history. Especially a Japanese student who studies western music knows almost nothing about the instruments and history of traditional Japanese music. The main reason is our lack of interest.

The French people asked me many questions about traditional Japanese music. Surely they were more interested in the music and history of a country far from France than Western music. I had prepared a little bit for a presentation in Japan, but I had to make the presentation in French. It was strange, but I had to go to the library in Paris to do research on traditional Japanese music.

They know about things like “Edo Era,” “Kabuki,” and “Tea Ceremony.” Day by day I regretted that, having studied nothing but music, I had become so ignorant of Japan where I had lived.

I even asked my family in Japan to send me my high school textbooks of

Japanese history as well as world history. I appreciated the goodness of Japan for the first time when I lived away from the country.

Anyway, when I was selected as the recipient of the scholarship program by the Rotary International, I barely passed its dead line, just as I had barely passed the age limit of 29 years old for the Besançon Competition.

My kindergarten doctor happened to be a committee member of the Rotary club. My French professor at the Tokyo University of the Arts took lots of his precious time for me, and later he also came to a university in France when I was studying abroad there. What is more, a counselor in the Rotary club in France happened to be connected with the music conservatory in Paris. I am thankful for being fortunate in everything.

Now that I had won the International Besançon Competition, the 1st step for a successful career for conductors, and especially because I had won it as a woman, I sensed the significance of the prize weighing me down.