

## **Conductors' Piano Recital**

This annual concert began on April Fools' Day in 1999. My students from the Department of Conducting at the Tokyo University of the Arts performed in this event. I had been producing concerts where I could play the piano while conducting. I had no nervousness on the stage while playing the piano since I had been performing as a conductor. But, I thought it would be good for my students to experience the sense of nervousness on the stage, and that was why I decided to have a piano recital by them. They could choose any program. Twelve or thirteen conductors (current students of the university or the alumni students) play the program of their choice based on their own interpretation. Not many of them were good at playing the piano, so we livened up the recital by being creative. Of course the recital was free of charge.

Many people come to see the recital each year. Most of them are friends and music business partners the students had been acquainted with through their conducting careers. It was a success. As our customary encore, all the participants gathered together and formed a "human orchestra," in which they sang each section of the orchestra. Some sang melodies as a flute or a violin, which was fine, but it was more fun to see others, like one singing low as contrabass, or especially the "percussionist", who made onomatopoeia of an instrument, while pretending to play the instrument. When the "percussionist" was making jingling or whamming sounds, causing the audience to laugh, the rest of the orchestra had to suppress it and continue singing. The members of the orchestra, who were all conductors, sang in the tempos they chose. We did not keep ourselves together. We tried it once by designating one person as a conductor, but no one looked at him. Everyone acted independently, which amused the audience.

As the senior to the rest of the students, Mr. Yoshiaki Ooshima creatively made the program for the recital every year. One time, each performer's character was compared to animals as fortune telling. Another time, each performer wrote comments on their favorite compositions and composers. The portraits of the performers were also drawn on the program rather than their photos. We ended up keeping this annual recital for five years. Let me list some impressive performances because of their uniqueness rather than their

technicality.

*Rajio Taisō (Radio Calisthenics) No. 1 & No. 2*, performed by Takeshi Ooi—his warm-ups on the stage and the novelty of his choice of this piece won big laughter.

*Neko Funjatta (Flea Waltz)*, performed by Kazuki Yamada — his piano performance, while describing a scene where a student was playing in a music room while practicing the piano, was convincing.

*Carmen Fantasia*, performed by Yoko Matsuo, and acted by Takeshi Ooi—the music was the popular Carmen, but it would have been boring by itself, so I asked the actor to act as if he were doing fortune-telling by cards. The actor played a convincing part by walking around the stage with the black grand piano cover over himself.

*The Scene of a Solfeggio Lesson*, taught by Masanori Mikawa—he actually presented the scene of his lesson on the basic music training necessary for a conductor, such as aural training and *solfeggio* on the stage.

*4 Minutes and 33 Seconds*, performed (?) by Takeshi Ooi—a parody of John Cage's composition. Originally a pianist would sit in front of the piano and do nothing for 4:33. In this performance, the performer spread out a road map on the music stand and looked at the map during the time. Occasionally sounds of laughter and coquettish voice echoed from the backstage (I also participated in making these sounds). Once in a while, the pianist fell asleep on the chair and somebody would walk into the stage to wake him up. Eventually, the pianist was told, "That is enough!" and was forced to stop the performance. The audience loved this program.

Mr. Takeshi Ooi played a major role throughout the conductors' piano recitals.

## Conducting *Aida*

From the beginning, I did not expect to conduct *Aida* so many times. I saw this opera performance on TV by an Italian opera company for the first time when I was a student. The second act, especially the scene of triumphal march, was a famous and powerful chorus. A dynamic ballet performance added to the great spectacle of the scene. But, to be honest, I felt that the opera was not that interesting.

Then I had my first opportunity to conduct this opera. The Nerima Ward in Tokyo was planning an event at the Nerima Culture Center to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its independence from the Itabashi Ward. As I was thinking of integrating the Nerima Symphony Orchestra, which I had conducted for a long time, with ballet and chorus groups in the city together, an idea to perform *Aida* came to my mind. That was in 1997. Everyone felt good about performing the opera. But, it was not an easy one. First, the original opera songs were in the Italian language. Since the chorus was an amateur group, it would take the group six months to practice. Also many people came to the audition when we invited the public for the opera posts, and it was difficult to select the soprano singers. Professional singers were invited for all the posts as soloists. Since this opera had not been performed so often in Japan, these professional singers also kindly participated in practices with the chorus from the beginning. Some of those rehearsals, with a piano on the concert hall, were gorgeous. Due to the lack of finances, we could not prepare any stage sets, so the opera was performed simply with lighting and the stage setting that had been installed in the hall. We are so thankful for Mr. Keiichi Nakamura, who directed the opera in the midst of such limitations.

Our performance of *Aida* without big stage settings, was simple compared to ones with colorful costuming and sometimes with real animals on the stage. On the other hand, the music side of Verdi became central, and the music performance was very dramatic on the stage. Like the opera performance at a *Noh* theater, it is possible that we perform better on a stage with less settings. Despite having many issues, our performance was successful. Later on, I also performed *Aida* at the Kioi Hall in Tokyo and at another hall in Aichi.

## **It Stopped Raining!**

Among my numerous conducting performances, the *Aida* concert at Toyama in 2001 was especially memorable to me. This opera was originally commissioned and performed at the opera house in Cairo, Egypt, to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. There is a canal in Toyama, called the Fugan Unga and the Canal Park is located by the canal. An event presented itself to perform *Aida* by linking these two canals. The Aubade Hall in Toyama was a large grand hall and was perfect for the opera performance. The project was to perform the entire acts of *Aida* at the Aubade Hall by the ballet and chorus groups in the Toyama prefecture as well as professional musicians with roots in Toyama. Besides the concert at the hall, there would be another outdoor concert at the Canal Park so that the Toyama residents could come in touch with opera music as well.

It was right in the middle of the summer. The open-air performance of *Aida* at the Verona Arena in Italy is well known, so the people were excited and working hard for the outdoor concert. But I was feeling uneasy about rain. I am notorious for bringing bad weather to my concerts. When I conduct an open-air concert, it always rains against my will. And my feeling turned out to be correct. During the summer that year, it had been very hot and it had been raining in the evenings.

We could not start the open-air concert until it got darker. We had planned to start the concert at 7 P.M. The lighting and stage setting were ready during the day time. We also started rehearsing. The intense sunlight shone on us during the rehearsal. Because the direct sunlight would damage the music instruments, we finished the rehearsal early and waited for the evening to come.

Suddenly, huge dark clouds appeared and covered the sky, and it began raining. Before long, it was pouring. It was not just a shower at sunset but kept pouring on and on. It did not seem to stop. Now we had to decide if we should start the concert on time or not. The rain continued to fall mercilessly. All the performers were dressed and ready, but looked outside nervously. Then I talked to one of the staff, "Many times in my concerts, it has rained just before starting.

But, thankfully, it usually stops right before the concert begins.” That comment became the green light. We would start the concert on time, though it was still raining.

I still remember the scene in front of me. It was still raining hard but then suddenly the bright sky began to appear. The rain ceased and the sun started shining again. It was sunset, of course. I had no clue what had been happening, but the weather was restored instantly. With no rain, people began coming to the park in increasing numbers. It was an exciting summer concert with fireworks to follow. “After the storm comes a calm.” That was the *Aida* that we had had.

### **Attracted to *La Valse***

I had not realized how fond I am of this composition. Ravel, the composer who wrote *La Valse*, is my favorite French composer and he is well-known for his *Boléro*. *La Valse* is, simply, a waltz. I do not care for the waltz that much, nor do I love to conduct it. *La Valse* is the only exception. I have decided to conduct this piece eighty times by the time I become eighty years old. But this piece requires a bigger orchestra and is also a larger composition to play. So, I haven't had many chances to conduct it. In addition, though it has many difficult notes to play, it finishes in only twelve minutes.

I conducted this piece for the first time in 1992 with Ashiya Symphony Orchestra. Prior to it, I had seen a rehearsal of Mr. Lorin Maazel when I was studying in Paris. I remember that I was so moved by the unique sound of the French Orchestra. But that did not inspire me enough to conduct the piece by myself. So, why did I suddenly change my opinion about this piece later?

It started when I was conducting this piece during a concert in Kyushu. During that time, I had been putting my heart into the piano and had played with Mr. Koji Oikawa with two pianos on the stage. One day, I casually played the piano score for *La Valse*. The sensation I had was different from when I conducted. I had not been able to have the orchestra get the tempo as I had wanted. The orchestra had not been able to express the subtle swing rhythm of the waltz well. It was then that I realized, with the piano, I could express anything that I wanted. I could even try various nuances. I liked that very much. When I conducted the piece with the orchestra after that experience, I noticed that the various sounds of musical instruments were laid on top of one another like the layers of colors on a painting. After that, I started appreciating this composition more than ever.

I've had many experiences regarding this composition, but let me share one of the most memorable. I spent the whole year of 2001 conducting *La Valse* at various occasions. It was a happy year for me. The following year of 2002, I conducted this piece at the New Year's Concert in Nagoya. On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, a heavy snow hit the city of Nagoya for the first time in forty years. I was not aware of how many inches of snow we got from the storm. There was a heavy traffic

jam in the city from the early morning. The concert started at 4 P.M. The audience who had come from afar must have had a hard time getting to the concert hall. But, the performance was successful and, having conducted *La Valse*, I was also satisfied.

I had another chance to conduct *La Valse* on February 2<sup>nd</sup> at a music hall in Sagami Ōno, Kanagawa. I was also going to play the piano in Saint-Saëns' *the Carnival of the Animals* as well as narrate on the stage. So, it was a big concert for me. Whenever I play the piano, I am very careful not to hurt my fingers. I thought it would not be a good idea to carry my heavy luggage with stage costumes for a long period of time, so I took a taxi to get to the concert hall, which turned out to be a serious mistake. There was traffic everywhere on the streets. The taxi did not move forward at all. I became nervous, as the rehearsal time was getting closer. Finally I decided to get out of the taxi, get on a train and rush to the music hall. I was late by thirty minutes. It was the most dreadful experience of my life. I had been active as a conductor for twenty years, and this was my first time being late. But, I kept myself calm, and managed to keep the rehearsal short like a gust of wind. I felt so sorry for the orchestra and the musicians who had been waiting for me. But by the time I conducted *La Valse* later that evening, I had forgotten about it because I was concentrating on conducting. Later, I apologized by giving them lots of chocolate as my Valentine gift.

I will never forget that concert performance of *La Valse*. Then, the next day came. It was February 3<sup>rd</sup>. In Japan it was *Setsubun*, the last day of winter according to the traditional Japanese calendar. The year of happenings had finally calmed down.

At this point, I have managed to conduct this composition seventeen times, and after playing this piece so many times, I have been able to finally play with a tempo which is fairly close to what I intend. The next step is to express the essence of the French culture in this piece. The more you play it, the bigger the task you deal with. Some musicians from the orchestras I have conducted say to me that they will definitely be there when I conduct the eightieth anniversary of performing *La Valse*. I have to keep myself healthy until eighty.