

Auditioning to Begin With

One day, without advance notice, I was asked to direct a junior orchestra. The Sumida Triphony Hall, operated by the ward of Sumida in Tokyo, was launching its junior orchestra and I was asked to be its music director. I had conducted amateur orchestras countless times, but many of them were made up of adults or college students. From a teacher's viewpoint, it is not easy to explain music expression to children. Besides, the practices of an orchestra made up of mainly elementary junior high school students are laborious.

But Mr. Noboru Yamazaki, the Mayor of the ward of Sumida, had a strong vision about this project. The Triphony Hall also had its desire to be the central location where residents could engage in music all the time. After thinking it through, I accepted the invitation. But I was both worried and excited about how to raise up this very young junior orchestra.

In September 2005, we had auditions for string instruments to start as a string orchestra. We were not sure how many children would apply for the audition, but about fifty applicants signed up. About half of the elementary, junior high and high school students were boys. I realized that the number of Japanese people playing string instruments had increased. I began visioning the future of the music field in Japan. While the members of the New Japan Philharmonic judged the applicants' technicality, I interviewed them. I wanted to talk with each child. The children, who came to the interview room with their guardians, looked nervous. When I asked one, "Do you like playing the violin?" he responded, "Yes." Immediately I heard his mother sitting right behind him sternly saying, "Say, 'Yes, Ma'am.'" So I told her, "Don't worry. Let the child speak naturally," and continued the interview as we talked like friends. The children quickly became relaxed and open, and one of them joyfully talked about having a turtle as his pet and about the food that his turtle ate.

Through the interviews I had the impression that these children had unique characters. Each was full of energy and told me about their fun days at school and their favorite composers. I was especially surprised when one of the elementary school students gave me his own opinion clearly.

It was then that I made a decision. I wanted to reflect the unique characters of these children directly in the orchestra. I wanted to make an orchestra in which the children could fully express themselves. I also decided I would rather have some children face different directions while playing their instruments, instead of making the orchestra too unified.

Our first rehearsal began in October. The children, as many as fifty, sat on the large stage of the Triphony Hall. Yet because many elementary school students were present, the stage still had open space. Most of the children had never played as orchestra members before, and many of them were confused because they did not know which parts in the music score they were supposed to play. Several music trainers stayed beside them all the time coaching the children. Some of the children were so small that their feet did not touch the floor when they sat on the chairs. But every one of them played seriously with his or her small instrument.

Moved by Children's Responses

Each rehearsal started at 6 P.M. and the children had to concentrate for the next three hours. This must have been a huge trial for them. I saw one elementary school student very tired when it was after 8 P.M., so I asked the child, "Are you sleepy?" I could not help smiling, when the child responded, saying, "Usually I am snuggling in my futon at this time." The rehearsal time had been set based on the standard of grownups. It must have been very difficult for the elementary school students to play their instruments until late at night. Each rehearsal was filled with new discoveries which interested me.

After a while I visited its rehearsal again. I was planning to have a small gathering after the rehearsal since the Christmas season was coming. The children sounded much better than when I saw them in October. There were some parts that were technically unstable, but as a whole they were able to play it as a piece. I was concerned, however, that they were playing with serious faces. Perhaps, even though they were children, they must have realized the hardness of practice. The liveliness and joy had disappeared from their faces.

I spent the whole evening on that day bringing back the childlike expressions they had shown on the first day of auditioning. I explained the formation of the composition they were playing was as simply as possible, so that the elementary school students as well as the high school students could understand it. For example, when I explained a form of *Rondo* where themes are repeated in various patterns, I compared each theme for a fruit, say "apple," and explained to them that "the apple" appeared several times. The children understood the concept immediately when the rondo form was instructed in similitudes, such as "apple, apple, banana, and apple again." In another section when the children had to move the bows fast to play the passage, I advised them to play as if a bullet train *Nozomi* were whizzing through the station. And they all played the passage moving the bows fast. Because they could change their music expressions drastically, I thought hard in order to use the right words of similitude to instruct the children. There was a section where I wanted the children to play soft with *piano*, but they could not do it well. So I told them, "We are all happy and are having a great time together. Then suddenly we remembered the very sad moment. That is how you play this soft part."

Immediately the children changed their facial expression and produced a distinctively *piano* sound. I observed their changes of feeling moment by moment as I used the subtle magic of words.

Super Excited by the First Concert

The Junior String Orchestra holds its concerts twice a year. We try to plan the concerts during the months of March and August when the members of the orchestra have no school. However, its first concert was held in February of 2006 at the Sumida Triphony Hall. We performed Mozart's *Divertimento* and Grieg's *Holberg Suite*. The children seemed to be nervous on the stage during the dress rehearsal. Though they had practiced on the same stage, they must have felt something different on the performing day. We spent much time practicing entering and leaving the stage, bowing and so on. I kept comforting the children who were entering the stage with serious faces. I said to them, "We are going to have a fun concert now, so enter the stage with smiles rather than with sour faces." Elementary school boys kept running around the backstage until the concert began. They must have had been full of energy. The string instrument trainers made sure that each instrument was in tune. I was more concerned about the appearances of the children, checking to see if the boys' white shirts were tucked in. "Be careful not to trip over the stage! Keep smiling!" I made friends of dozens of these children in one day. When the concert was over, all the children were super excited! After receiving applause from the audience, they all looked proud.

Children with Much Sensibility

The second term of the junior orchestra began in April 2006. I had been thinking of having the children compose their own melodies. Among my concerts that I had conducted in the past, I had been bothered by how musicians had different attitudes toward compositions arranged by someone else from ones that were original. They tended to take lightly the music notes played for only one time, or the notes that had not been written by famous composers such as Mozart and Beethoven. I concluded that that was because that they did not have their own experience of writing music in their childhood. I thought, "If these children transcribe the melodies they wrote with music notes, they would not take any music notes lightly when they grow up." That was why I gave them one instruction, "Why don't each of you write a short eight bar melody in C Major. Any rhythm is okay. We will arrange them for the junior string orchestra so that we could perform them together."

I was amazed by the numerous melodies brought out from these children. One child divided the melody in two voice parts. Another wrote a melody with an accompany part. Another used rhythm creatively. I had not expected that they could create and transcribe melodies so well on their own. They played each note of the melodies with the piano or the violin and wrote the notes on their music sheets. This moved me. We picked several melodies to arrange and perform in our next concert. Having added the piano and the saxophone parts to the stringed ensemble, we completed a pretty medley. Together we were going to perform the melody that we had made. It would be our premiere of the composition, the only one in the world.

The children named each song as they practiced them. The titles they came up with also amazed me very much: *Symphony of Talkative Winds*; *Dreaming Birds in the Future*; and *Paradise of Butterflies*. How poetic these titles were!

Since we would be performing on the year of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of a Soviet composer, Shostakovich, we selected his Piano Concerto No.1. This work was somehow a strange concerto performed by piano, trumpet and string orchestra. The concerto contained complex sections for string

instruments. But I intentionally wanted the children to play this piece. I wanted them to know that some compositions had such interesting rhythms. On the first day of rehearsal, I heard voices of disapproval from the music trainers, saying that this would be too difficult for the children to perform. Worried about it, I asked the members of the orchestra for their opinions. Their response was interesting. "We have just started the practice. It is going to be more fun as we practice." How differently children and adults perceived the reality!

The Birth of the Full Size Orchestra

In 2007 the Triphony Junior Orchestra was officially born. In addition to the current string instrument members, members for the brass instruments and percussions were auditioned. The Mayor of the Sumida Ward did not limit new children within the residents of Sumida but recruited them from cities outside Sumida as well, which made this organization special. I do not mean to say that these children came from all over Japan, but many of them commuted from the Kanto area, and some from as far as Ōiso in Kanagawa. They practiced every weekend either on Saturday or on Sunday evening. The rehearsal ended around 9 P.M., so the younger children went home with their parents. A full orchestra, as many as one hundred members, gathered in the hall. Trainers for the brass and percussion instruments were added to the string instrument trainers. The rehearsal time became lively.

In March, the Triphony Junior Orchestra had its first concert. The program for the concert was Suppé's *the Light Cavalry Overture*, *Voices of Spring*, an orchestral waltz written by Johann Strauss II, and *Finlandia*, a tone poem composed by Sibelius. With a guest singer, the orchestra also performed "O zittre nicht, mein lieber Sohn," the aria of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's opera, *the Magic Flute*. I wanted the children to see the singer singing the aria with her rich expression right in front of their eyes. As I had expected, the children accompanied the singer with their eyes wide open. They were stunned by the extremely high voice coming out of the singer. By the time the rehearsal was over, I saw the children humming parts of the aria.

The children who played the string instruments showed interest when the brass instruments or the percussions played their parts. They looked at the brass and percussion players and listened to their sounds carefully.

When I told them how *Finlandia* was composed and its historical background, the childrens' hearts changed, and they started playing with the spirit of the composition and the atmosphere during the time of Sibelius when the Grand Duchy of Finland was under pressure from the Russian Empire. This made me realize again that a junior orchestra was a place of opportunity for children to experience and learn many things through music.

Unlike adults, children do not improve quickly. We, as instructors, became worried as the concert date came closer. But a week before they suddenly changed and improved a lot. I wonder if the children had also felt nervous as their concert date was approaching. They finished their first concert as a full orchestra with their faces beaming joy.

Then, in July, the junior orchestra visited the Narihira Elementary School in Sumida so that the school children could see other children of the same age performing. We wanted the school children to be interested in the orchestra active in their very neighborhood. It was during the month of July. The rainy season had not finished so humidity was high inside the school gym where the orchestra had its concert. That was a hard concert for the children. The members of the orchestra, despite the conditions, wonderfully performed pieces like *Finlandia* and *Without a Care*, a polka by Josef Strauss. The students at the elementary school were surprised to see the members of the orchestra, their same ages, performing.

When I was talking with the principal of the elementary school before the concert, he proudly told me that the school had a long history and the lyrics of the school song were written by Hakushū Kitahara and the melody was composed by Kosaku Yamada (a.k.a. Kōsçak Yamada). Immediately I had the idea to sing the school song with the children at the Narihira Elementary School, accompanied by the orchestra. I asked the principal to find a music score for the song. He found the original score that had been kept safely, and was of value. While the orchestra was doing its dress rehearsal, the trainers quickly arranged the song for the orchestra, wrote the music parts by hand, and copied them and distributed them to the orchestra. We rehearsed the song only once before the concert. But it was perfect to perform the school song together as an encore. Everyone was overjoyed. I was also honored to perform a venerable song written by the famous composer.

Remarkable Growth of the Children

August in 2007 was the month I saw much growth of the junior orchestra. The orchestra played Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with a guest pianist, Mr. Masahiro Saitoh. The composition had become popular through a television program. We also selected Ravel's *Boléro* for the program. We were a little worried about having the children perform many solo parts in the piece. But the children bravely accepted the challenge of the fun music. Within these two years they had improved greatly. The little children who had not been able to reach the floor two years ago could sit steady on the chairs and play. They were able to understand my instructions without using children's terms.

There were many jazzy rhythms in Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was fun for the children. When the pianist was playing while feeling the rhythm of the composition, the children seemed to believe that they were supposed to sit still. I told them, "You can move your body, just like the doll that we used to have, the one that responded to sounds." But they did not show much response to me. I realized that they had not been born yet when these dolls were popular. But their face changed as soon as they found out that they did not need to be still.

I told them, "You can be lost in your own world while playing." They could enter their own worlds so easily. Adults who tend to think too much have hard time doing it. I loved to watch the children playing the violins as they wanted, and their expressions were wonderful.

One of their guardians said to me, "At home it is impossible for the children to stay focused and practice for one hour." Around this time, the number of attendance at the concerts had increased. And members of the orchestra had also increased, so the concert stage was filled with children.

The First Concert Tour

Then the orchestra had its first concert tour. There was a junior orchestra festival in Niigata City. Nine organizations from as far as Kitakyushu, Sendai, Okayama, and Toyota performed in the festival. The Sumida Junior Orchestra rode in three charter buses to Niigata. I rode in one of the buses because I wanted to go with the children. It would take us almost six hours to get there, so Ms. Masaki, an administration staff, prepared lots of games that we could play during the bus ride. Many children displayed wonderful skills other than music. I could not believe how much fun I had with the children.

We began our practice as soon as we arrived in Niigata. But since some of the children could not focus, we finished the practice early to rest for a while. Other orchestras were curious about the Sumida Junior Orchestra which was attending the festival for the first time. We were a brand new orchestra. It made me glad to see the children performing at their best on the stage. They performed with character. The children, who had been happy and romping in the buses, performed with the same liveliness.

Many children did not go to bed in the hotel for a long time. Many of them made a game of ringing door bells and then running away, until late in the night. The children who were freed from their guardians' eyes became trouble makers for their music trainers and staff. This trip was a big lesson for the whole orchestra. The junior high school students, as well as high school students, regretted the trouble they had made, and initiated some rules to govern the organization. They chose leaders and created various roles such as managing their music sheets.

For the concert on March 2008, we selected compositions with the theme of legends and magic. We also decided to perform Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* with a ballet dance. With the collaboration with the Inoue Ballet Foundation, we performed famous scenes of the ballet such as *Waltz*, *Scène*, and *Hungarian Dance*. The children must have been blessed by performing while watching the ballet dancing right in front of them. Many of the members of the orchestra had taken ballet lessons. The ballet performance was gorgeous, but the orchestra performance was superb as well. Tickets for the concert sold out quickly. In

front of the packed audience loudly applauding, the members of the junior orchestra proudly stood on the stage.

So, as their music director, I want to have the members experience various types of music. Performing a symphony well does not automatically prove that it is a good orchestra. I wish that this orchestra would be an orchestra distinct in the free expressions of the members. That would keep these children fond of music even after growing up.

I am utterly thankful to Mr. Noboru Yamazaki, the Mayor of Sumida; Mr. Kohya Nakamura, Ms. Kazuyo Yamada, Mr. Yoshihiro Ueno, Ms. Teiko Masaki, and Mr. Hidenori Sano, who have actively supported the children at the office; all the music trainers who have never given up on the children; and the staff who have set up the stage for each concert.