Tokyo, Haven for Orchestras (Part II)
Surprises Across the Board
Robert Markow

This article was originally printed in "American Record Guide", July-August 2013.

[Asia's world-class orchestras remain mostly unreported in the Western press. While ARG has occasional reports from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Bangkok, we are finally catching up on the mother lode of orchestras in Japan, thanks to Robert Markow, whose first report was in Mar/Apr 2012. --Editor]

What really hits the first-time visitor to Tokyo, or even the second- or third-timer, is the sheer number of people who race about this overwhelming megapolis of 35 million. The next thing that strikes hard is how essential to daily life is the local transportation system. For the trains and subways to stop running would be a catastrophe on the order of the entire worldwide web shutting down. An American concertgoer asks, "Is there parking available at the hall?" A Tokyoite asks, "When is the last train home?" And for the western classical music lover, the third inevitably amazing thing is how many concerts go on here. On any given day there are up to a dozen events of professional caliber on tap at Tokyo's 180 concert venues. Do the math: that's over 4,000 concerts a year, not counting amateur, semi-amateur, and school events.

As noted in my previous report from Tokyo, halls are almost always 85-95% full, dress is casual except for businessmen coming directly from the office, the audience age range is evenly distributed (lots of young people), and ticket prices for domestic events are reasonable (roughly $20-$70).

No other city in the world can boast *eight* full-time, full-size, fully professional symphony orchestras. Following up on my November 2011 visit, when I heard six of those orchestras in ten days, I made a return visit last April to hear four of the same again, plus a new one, in just six days.

Less than 24 hours after arriving, I attended a concert by one of Tokyo's finest orchestras, the Japan Philharmonic. Even through the haze of jet lag, I could determine that it sounded even better this time. Kazuki Yamada opened his program with Brahms's "Academic Festival Overture", which had the kind of rhythmic precision and balance George Szell would have been proud of. Tatauki Narita starred in a tasteful, poetic account of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, following which came one of the most expressively beautiful and refined performances I have ever heard of Saint-Saens's "Organ Symphony". It began magically, as if from nowhere; one could not help but be transfixed. Hiromi Nagai's organ playing blended perfectly with the orchestra, more an extension of it rather than the fierce opposition we sometimes get.

Hearing the Tokyo Philharmonic (not to be confused with the Japan Philharmonic) again reconfirmed my earlier claim that this is now probably Japan's best orchestra. Like its Viennese counterpart, Tokyo's Philharmonic consists of a pool of about 150 musicians

who perform opera, ballet, and special events in addition to a subscription series, for a total of about 300 performances a year. Also like Vienna, they have no permanent music director (Dan Ettinger is billed as the current "chief conductor" but is with the orchestra only a few months a year), yet they manage to stay in peak form. The Beethoven works I heard under the direction of Karajan protege Ken Takaseki--Symphonies Nos. 4 and 6, Piano Concerto No 5--were all too familiar, yet came vividly to life, glowing with freshness, energy, and momentum. Takaseki infused every note with finesse and elegance, ensemble was machine-perfect, rhythms clean and crisp. The woodwind choir played as a cohesive unit, the second horn matched the first perfectly, and the principal flute sounded like pure gold. This orchestra puts forth a warm, generous quality of sound that simultaneously lacks nothing in brilliance. If the Tokyo Philharmonic should show up in a hall near you, don't miss it.

Surprises abound on Tokyo's music scene, and the visitor quickly comes to expect the unexpected. Take the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony's performance of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring". This has become so much a repertory staple that even youth orchestras play it now. But when was the last time you heard it performed with a *full* orchestra in the pit (quintuple woodwinds, eight horns, two sets of timpani, etc.) with dancers on stage? Maurice Bejart's choreography invited adjectives like earthy, primal, wildly erotic, sensuous, and exhilarating. As danced by the superb Tokyo Ballet (West Point cadets could learn a thing or two from their incredible coordination), it was all of these, accompanied by powerful impulses and fierce energy from the orchestra directed by James Judd. Low brass and percussion in particular distinguished themselves.

Surprise surfaced again at a concert by the NHK Symphony, beginning with the fact that I discovered upon arriving at the hall that the performance had begun nearly an hour earlier. I missed Viktoria Mullova in Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1, but heard Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 led by Peter Oundjian. Here came another surprise--Japan's best-known orchestra abroad delivering what was surely the most tepid, passionless, and uninspired performance of this lushly romantic favorite I can recall. It reminded me of food without taste. Phrases went nowhere, climaxes came and went without leaving an impression, and the orchestra's sound was so bright it almost hurt the ears at times.

Another unpleasant surprise came from the New Japan Philharmonic, a breakaway organization from the Japan Philharmonic more than forty years ago (the mechanics are too complex to go into here). This is surely a much finer orchestra than what I heard Frans Bruggen do with it. Or *to* it, perhaps. Bruggen, I'm told, is something of a cult figure among concertgoers in eastern Tokyo (a community in itself). This concert was billed as his final visit to Japan (now 78, he is in poor health), and the audience accorded him the only standing ovation I have ever observed in Japan. Yet this had to be more out of respect than regard for the performance. Sloppy attacks, poor intonation, uneven rhythm, wayward phrasing, a coarse sound, and other problems beset both Schubert symphonies (Nos. 5 and 9). Could this have been the same Bruggen we know from his many excellent performances with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century?

Foreign orchestras and opera companies regularly pass through Tokyo. The Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics come almost every year, selling out at stratospheric prices. In the brief six days I was in Tokyo, I missed the Munich Philharmonic with Lorin Maazel and the Teatro alla Scala doing Verdi's "Otello" (two performances from each), but I did catch the St Petersburg Academic Symphony in a matinee program of excerpts from Stravinsky's "Firebird", Prokofieff's "Romeo and Juliet", and all three of Tchaikovsky's ballets. I suspected initially this was just one of those bogus orchestras Russia sends on tours to earn foreign exchange. Was I wrong! This ensemble is more than eighty years old, and is the one that gave the historic world premiere of Shostakovich's "Leningrad Symphony" in 1942. "Academic" is an honorary designation and carries no affiliation with any educational institution.

Michiyoshi Inoue conducted the St Petersburgers with the clarity of a Leinsdorf, the exuberance of a Dudamel, and the charisma of a Bernstein. He literally danced his way through the program, yet maintained the kind of rock-solid pulse dancers' love. (I learned afterwards that he had studied ballet himself for ten years.) Alternating unscripted commentary with musical numbers, Inoue generated the kind of excitement I can only imagine Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphians must have created nearly a century ago. The very sound of that Russian orchestra, like the Philadelphia of years past, almost knocked me out of my seat right from the first note--huge, deep, richly resonant, with never a rough edge or blaring moment. The violins positively gleamed, and the low brass could have given their Chicago Symphony counterparts a run for their money.

I shot down to Osaka (by Bullet Train, of course) to hear one final concert at one of my favorite halls in the world, 800-seat Izumi Hall, which is modeled after Vienna's Musikverein, even to the chandeliers and the faux windows lining the upper reaches of the side balcony. Violinist Augustin Dumay cranked out (or so it seemed) still another performance of Franck's Violin Sonata with scant Gallic finesse, and after intermission conducted the Kansai Philharmonic, one of Osaka's four orchestras, in an absurdly romanticized performance of Mozart's delectable rococo charmer, Symphony No. 29.

Even in the Franck it was obvious that Dumay's pianist was the far more refined musician. Russian Pavel Kolesnikov, winner of the 2012 Honens Competition in Calgary, was flown in at the last minute to replace the indisposed Canadian-born Helene Mercier. But it was in Chausson's Concert for Piano, Violin, and Strings that Kolesnikov really came into his own. It was astonishing enough that this 24-year-old just happened to know the seldom-played work, but the felicity, panache, and innate musicianship with which he dashed off the scintillating passages revealed a pianist of the highest order. He possesses the crystalline clarity of a Horowitz, draws a truly gorgeous tone from the instrument, and above all has that rare ability to rivet an audience from the first note. His encores--an early unnumbered Chopin waltz and a Scarlatti sonata--were breathtaking. In addition, he has a stage presence so modest and unassuming that he immediately endears himself to an audience. Here, surely, is one of the great pianists of the younger generation, and I for one would travel many miles to hear him again. He was a surprise indeed--on this trip, the biggest of all!