

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# A Question of Cultural Identity

MOTOKO NABESHIMA

LAST year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of my first visit to Europe, which began with my arrival in Amsterdam in 1969. After living three-and-a-half years in the Netherlands I returned to Japan to establish my permanent residence and have lived the life of a migratory bird ever since, 'summering' in Europe every year.

Most of my countrymen upon ending their studies abroad and returning to Japan find themselves in situations which make it difficult to leave Japan again for an extended period of time, except for an occasional holiday. Others find it difficult to leave their adopted countries and therefore seek working visas or other means of supporting themselves so that they can stay indefinitely. Alternatively, some make Europe their home through marriage. My case, however, fits none of these categories, since I am a professor at a Japanese music college and yet contrive to spend an average of two months out of every year in Europe. In this way I have sought to become familiar with the different languages, currencies and other aspects of the cosmopolitan, European way of life and also to view the world from a European perspective as opposed to a Far Eastern one.

Japanese are often tempted to regard their period of overseas studies with nostalgia and to explain their experiences to the younger generation in the form of an ideological product. As far as teaching responsibilities are concerned, however, I find certain advantages in regularly refreshing my overseas experiences. One is the opportunity to reinforce my familiarity with many European languages and cultures by actually living there, maintaining contact with mentors, younger associates and colleagues who have a different background from my own. Another advantage is being able to ascertain instrument construction and inspect specialised publications in their original settings, thereby acquiring authentic knowledge that I can pass on to colleagues and students in Japan.

OF COURSE, there are many disadvantages to such a lifestyle, the first being the economic burden involved. Generally, too, only off-season events are held during the summer in Europe. With rare exceptions, my duties in Tokyo have prevented

me from appearing in the regular European spring and autumn music seasons. Also, my European sojourns have prevented me from participating in summer music festivals in Japan and from earning a regular place as a summer instructor. Moreover, it has been difficult to undertake any joint projects with foreign players who often visit during the summer and early autumn months.

Taking all this into account, one might wonder why I decided to pursue this lifestyle. There are at least two answers to this question:

(1) Living and performing in Europe has helped me realize a dream I have had ever since my schooldays: to walk on the land once inhabited by the composers whose music I play; to live my daily life using their languages; and to immerse myself in the intellectual and instinctual milieu that shaped them. Over the past twenty-five years I believe I have essentially achieved this and I also feel it has helped me to assimilate the *esprit* of a musical tradition that is not my own.

(2) Playing western music for a western audience permits a certain ease of communication arising from shared understanding. Unlike performances in Japan which require translation or explication of titles or texts, performances in Europe permit the player and audience to encounter directly the essence of the music.

## Early experiences with the harpsichord

THE first time I played a harpsichord was in the studio of NHK, Japan's national broadcasting station. A composition student at the time, I was interested in the instrument's unusual timbre, which reminded me of metal pots in a kitchen and yet sometimes revealed a subdued, silvery lustre.

I listened to Wanda Landowska, Eta Harich-Schneider, Ralph Kirkpatrick and others on record. Although I enjoyed the plucked power of the instrument as well as the rhythmical effects that could be achieved through attack and arpeggiation, I rarely felt attracted to the tone-colour.

My next contact came after I began teaching at Toho, when the school purchased a five-pedal, double-manual harpsichord built by Neupert. Initially, harpsichord instruction was the responsibility of my senior colleague, E. Hashimoto, who had temporarily returned to Japan from the

US in 1966. The following year, I assumed those teaching duties.

About this time I became interested in highlighting musical texture as an interwoven structure of independent lines. I also came to prefer the intimacy associated with plucking the strings as opposed to striking them percussively as on a piano. Without the plucking action I felt I lost contact with the notes, reducing the act of playing to a mechanical exercise.

Also in 1966 I had the opportunity to learn for three months on a Dowd Italian harpsichord at the home of Prof. Hashimoto. This was my first experience of a historical harpsichord. It was an exquisitely beautiful instrument with a sensitive action and a rich timbre that sang and spoke with great expressiveness. Every change in touch was reflected faithfully in the sound. Here at last I had found an instrument that enabled me to enjoy harmony, polyphony and rhythm all at once: for the first time I felt that I had gained true insight into the music of the Baroque period.

The final element that set my resolve was the LP recordings of Gustav Leonhardt, which I discovered at about this time. His deeply etched sounds and flexible *Agogik* clarified for me what the Baroque composers were striving for. While sparking my interest in historical research, Leonhardt's recordings also shocked me with the freshness of their sound and I was surprised to discover how deeply they could move the modern listener.

### **Leonhardt and Logos**

'IN THE beginning was the Word'—thus went the prayer in the mission school of my youth. But this Word, this *Logos*, first became a reality to me when I set foot in Europe, with its Christian heritage. In contrast to the free-floating, pointillistic thought-habits of Japan I found European thought to be linear, with a definite beginning and end, and with a discernible direction. Verbs provide the primary axis for European languages, reflecting a dynamic approach to the world. For logical discourse to proceed, clear distinctions and analysis are necessary; concepts do not float unmoored in the air, but are constructed on solid ground. If something is not expressed it may as well not exist: people use words, even in day-to-day life, as tools to convey reason.

This approach is in stark contrast to Japan, where people who make focused inquiries are considered impolite and there is a high tolerance for ambiguity. Many Japanese simply eliminate

altogether the process involved in reaching agreement and are satisfied with the illusion that communication has taken place.

I grew up in a male-dominated world where absolute obedience was demanded of younger people and where no one was encouraged to ask questions. Perhaps this is why I have so many unanswered questions stored up inside me and why I could easily spend the rest of my life discovering reasons and searching for origins and sources, and never find it tiresome. Shaped by this background I felt twice the normal desire to discover what other people thought through dialogue and to learn about their culture and philosophy. Study with Leonhardt fed into this desire powerfully: he demanded many things of his students, but his greatest demand was to achieve an expressiveness ranging from an explosive fire to an expansive, deep serenity. Auguste Rodin said, 'Anything without character isn't art.' Leonhardt's paramount concern was for art to have many different facets that remain in flux and can be created anew with each performance.

### **'Origo et Practica'**

IT IS A truism that the proper use of a musical language depends in large part on an understanding of its cultural background. Many Japanese, however, tend to interpret 'cultural understanding' in terms of what can be learned



A seminar at 'Origo et Practica'

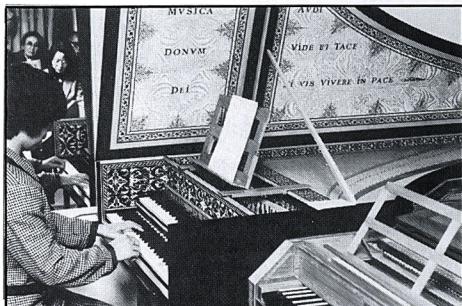
through books rather than through hands-on experience. Especially in the case of Baroque music, which is intimately connected with distinct regional characteristics, both kinds of cultural knowledge are required.

It was to fulfil the need for a balance between intellectual understanding and practical experience that I founded in Japan in 1974 a society dedicated to early music: *Origo et Practica*. Through this society I sought to instil in my students the research habits they should naturally possess as performers. Accordingly, *Origo et Practica* provides a contact point with European culture and a forum for European musicians to conduct masterclasses in Japan. We also research and discuss historical background and pursue source-reading, while basing our performance interpretation on an investigation of a given composition's roots and published textual conditions. Finally, *Origo et Practica* provides a place where we can practise and realize our ideas.

Currently the group has three harpsichords and two clavichords commissioned from European builders as well as an 18th-century fortepiano. We also have a small library of facsimile scores and various musicological works in their original languages. Many of Japan's leading harpsichordists, organists and Baroque orchestral conductors are former students who participated in *Origo et Practica*. In addition, we keep instruments built by Japanese harpsichord makers and make them available to students and visitors. In this way we contribute to the exchange of ideas between students and instrument makers and encourage their mutual development.

### Recital series

Soon after I returned to Japan I began giving monthly recitals, using a short-octave virginals, a 17th-century Italian and an 18th-century French



A student playing the harpsichord. There is a Viennese fortepiano just visible in front.

instrument. I had many aspirations: I hoped to familiarize Japanese audiences with Baroque composers and their many masterpieces, which had become a part of me through everyday exposure in Europe; I especially hoped to immerse listeners in the flowing current of 17th-century music, which was virtually unknown in Japan; and I also hoped to allow audiences to experience directly the beauty and necessity of mean-tone, Werckmeister and other historical tunings.

A group of artists, writers, historians, journalists and other intellectuals active in diverse fields began attending these recitals on a regular basis. Eventually some of them proposed that we arrange more intimate meetings in which participants could share insights in a relaxed social setting. This was the genesis of the *Homo Ludens* salon, attended by people with a dislike for modern society's obsession with economic performance which restricts human lives to the hectic pursuit of high incomes. As well as listening to and talking about music, the members help to broaden the horizons of young Baroque musicians by giving lectures in their different specialist fields.

### Early music in Japan today

As well as the early music department at Toho Gakuen College of Music there are early music departments at several other conservatories in Tokyo and western Japan, where many of my former students now teach.

Concerts of early music are now held somewhere in Japan almost every day and the harpsichord makers who supply the instruments are kept busy. More than a hundred Japanese performers own instruments that were made in Europe and it has become a simple matter to hear the sort of instruments that were used in Italy, France, Germany and England during the 17th and 18th centuries. Compared with twenty years ago, when Japanese harpsichord makers had made no more than fifteen to twenty French-type instruments and only a few Italian- and Flemish-type instruments, today's conditions seem different indeed.

Virtually every aspect of Japan's early music field is thriving. We have excellent instruments, outstanding halls, accomplished players, a recital circuit that attracts top talent from Europe and the US, and a healthy market for both domestic and imported CDs. Education is being actively pursued and materially prosperous Japanese, who tend to flock around foreign performers, have given managers more to do by demanding more and more performances.

Despite this plenty, however, I am sometimes beset by feelings of emptiness and frustration. Somehow I sense a lack of maturity in Japan. Certainly, performers and audiences are eager and enthusiastic but there is a crucial difference between 'learning' and 'creating'. 'Learning' alone does not bring true awareness.

### Personal reassessment

**F**OR me, music is not something that exists independently from culture; nor is it an abstract entity that can be created through the decoding of symbols; nor again is it an empty vessel into which the performer pours his or her personal emotions. Though always grounded in a particular time and place, music of genius touches a deeper, universal human realm that transcends both. I did not pursue my European performance trips for the sake of intellectual tourism or snobbery but rather to rediscover the genuine experiences through which I enrich my playing. For me, cultural understanding is the key to musical understanding.

My trips to Europe over the past twenty-five years have been motivated by my love of Baroque music, but they have also helped me to reappraise myself and to see myself again through fresh eyes. Today's mass society is far removed from the aesthetics of feudal times, but in Japan's 'good old days' form and style were maintained with strict discipline. I was born and raised in the aristocratic society of pre-war Japan, and the world of my parents, my spiritual home, in fact bears an unexpected affinity with the ancient traditions of Europe. I do not feel this affinity intellectually so much as instinctively and I suspect that, deep below the surface, my career has been supported by ambivalence: on one level I wanted to escape the strict constraints that my birth and upbringing imposed upon me; on another level, I felt a deep attraction to a culture and milieu that was similar to the one I had left behind.

H&F is very grateful to David Crandall for his assistance in the preparation of this article.

### Motoko Nabeshima

#### HARPSICHORDIST

##### Biography

- 1958 Graduated from Toho Gakuen College of Music with diplomas in piano and composition
- 1959 Invited to join faculty at Toho
- 1960 Started research into European instrumental music
- 1965 Studying harpsichord playing and musicology
- 1966-68 Gave many concerts in Japan, researching the historical harpsichord and its performance practice
- 1969-72 Studied with G. Leonhardt (hpd), Anneke Uittenbosch, V. Hampe, Wieland and Sigiswald Kuijken (chamber music) and E. Kooiman (org.). Tourred extensively in Europe giving recitals (including Amsterdam and London). Contact with W. Kuijken and N. Harnoncourt (orchestral works by Monteverdi), etc.
- 1973 Founded 'Origo et Practica', a musical society in Tokyo devoted to the theory and practice of early music
- 1974-88 Held many concerts, returning to Europe every year: Holland, Belgium, England, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Italy
- 1976 Gave a summer course for Baroque music in Malmö
- 1983-84 Toured Italy and Spain to play and study the original organ at main churches and cathedrals
- 1985 J. S. Bach and D. Scarlatti: 300th anniversary commemorative concerts (Heidelberg, Bruges, Paris, Rotterdam, Namur)
- 1987 Recitals for summer festivals at Knokke (Belgium), Apeldoorn (Holland) and Presteigne (UK). Recital and chamber music concerts in Paris
- 1988 Recital in Parma as opening concert for *Accademia di musica italiana per organo*. Duo concerts with Remy Syrter (Maastricht, Weerselo, Hoensbroek,

##### Apeldoorn)

- 1989 Schloßkonzert in Hückeswagen near Köln. Recital at Japanese Ambassador's residence at Brussels (Couchet 1646). Other recitals in Brussels. Seminar and lessons to students of Academy of Early Music Amsterdam.
- 1990 Concerts and masterclasses in US. Recitals in Los Angeles, Bloomington, Ann Arbor, Berkeley. Masterclasses at Universities of Indiana and Michigan
- 1992 Recitals at *Accademia di musica italiana*, Pistoia (Italy) and Veruela festival, Zaragoza (Spain)
- 1994 Recitals at Holywell Music Room (Oxford) and Fenton House (London)

##### Discography

- 1973 Trio concert with J. P. Rameau and M. Larrieu. Denon PCM OX-7006 ND
- 1979 Golden Age of Harpsichord Music. Works by J. S. Bach, F. Couperin and J. P. Rameau. Toshiba EMI TA-6009
- 1989 Harpsichord Music in 18th-Century Paris, Madrid and El Escorial. Works by F. and A. L. Couperin, J. A. Soler and D. Scarlatti. CD EMS Brussels
- 1991 J. S. Bach and his Predecessors. CD EMS Brussels

##### Some extracts from recent reviews

- "... a rendere con gusto—un caldo successo" [... with good taste and sense—a hot success] —*La Nazione*, Pistoia 1992
- "opvallend was haar stylvolle interpretatie" [her interpretation was outstanding, characterized by a lucid sense of style] —*Twentsche Courant*, 1988
- "Nabeshima rapidly established a dramatic and forthright mode of playing that was ideally suited to the Italian toccatas" —*Oxford Times*, 1994