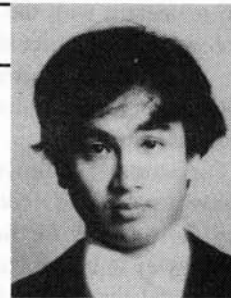

Interview: Junichi Hirokami and Yasukazu Uemura



Junichi Hirokami

Tokyo College of Music emphasizes western classics

The Tokyo College of Music is the oldest private school dedicated to the preservation and development of western Classical music in Japan. It was founded in 1907, toward the end of the Meiji Era, by Japanese private contributors, to bring the best ideas from the West.

The orchestra toured the United States in November for only the second time in its history, playing at Orchestra Hall, Chicago; debuting at Carnegie Hall, New York; and performing at Washington's Kennedy Center.

The college's founding principle is "not to have every student become a professional musician," Maestro Junichi Hirokami told EIR, but that "by studying music, through this development of the heart, the personal strength of the individual and the contribution one can make to society are advanced."

Specifically, the aim is "to build the character of the individual which is necessary for the study of especially western Classical music," Tokyo College of Music President Yasukazu Uemura said.

The college has almost 2,000 students, including 200 in a special music kindergarten program, 300 students of the Tokyo College of Music High School, and 1,500 university undergraduates. In April 1993, the first class was formed of its new graduate school.

Maestro Hirokami is a graduate of the college, and now conducts the Norrköping Symphony in Stockholm, Sweden. This interview with Maestro Hirokami and Tokyo College of Music President Yasukazu Uemura was conducted by Kathy Wolfe in Washington on Nov. 17.

EIR: The Tokyo College of Music was founded in 1907, at the end of the Meiji Era. What was the school's mission?

Hirokami: The purpose was not for every student to become a professional musician, although of course some will become professionals. Others would become workers or housewives. However, by studying music, through this development of the heart, the personal strength of the individual and the contribution one can make to society are advanced.

EIR: For the entire population, not just for the elites?

Hirokami: Yes, we want to give this basic education through the music to everyone.

Uemura: Because this will raise the general level of culture of the population, the same idea you have with your magazine, in promoting Classical music in the United States. By raising the level of culture of the individual, we are raising the level of their personal responsibility and morality, through a deeper understanding of music, and by this, the students will make an impression on the society, which raises the general level of morality of the society as a whole. Of course this is a high ideal, but this is what we're at least trying to do.

EIR: One of the fathers of the Meiji Era was Yukichi Fukuzawa. The basis of Meiji philosophy, he once said, was that "I regard the human individual as the most sacred and responsible of all orderings on earth." He said that the purpose of his work in trying to introduce western culture into Japan was to raise up this idea. Was there an idea similar to Fukuzawa's behind the founding of your school?

Hirokami: Originally, the idea, I think, was simply to train individual students in the music, but, in fact, it turned out to be true that, while following the study of western music, that that quality of individual thinking method and individual character is rapidly developed. Music must be thought about individually, ideas about it must be created within each individual mind.

Uemura: Yes, to build the character of the *individual* which is necessary for the study of especially western Classical music.

In this way, something else Fukuzawa said will also come about: that through the college itself, this kind of training of individuals will also make the students ready to become citizens of the world, not just of Japan. One of the major purposes of our school, of course, is to help the students understand all aspects of western culture. We have a number of exchange programs; we have one, for example, with Indiana University School of Music at Bloomington, run by Neil Tuttle, and the purpose is to make these young people feel that they are an important part of the world, not just of Japan.

That's one reason why we take performance trips like

this, not just to perform, but so that the students will see what's going on in the world.

EIR: Fukuzawa also said that what really interested him about the large cannons which U.S. Commodore Perry had on the ships which he sailed into Tokyo Harbor was not the guns per se, but the "philosophy behind the guns." Is there a similar idea at your school, to try to study the philosophy behind what would enable Beethoven or Mozart to construct such great music?

Uemura: Yes, we do have that idea. It's not just the technique of western music that we're after; the school and the teachers all want to teach the full background of the world's music. Together with the music, we want students to pay attention to the entire history, language, and culture behind all the music of these countries. When Ryohei Nomoto, who built up the school after the war, was president, he brought in foreign professors to teach, for example, the religious background of western Classical music, the Bible, the entire background, as well as English and all the other languages.

And then, after we do this, we have an additional project: to mix this with Oriental philosophy, and with our own Japanese music—for example, Zen has some very pure and unusual ideas from the western standpoint—to refine the mixture, and then to re-export it!

For example, that's what we're doing this time with the Japanese *samisen* concerto, which was composed by a student of ours, Mr. Hirohisa Akigishi, who studied western music with us and then also studied Japanese music. Now he's composing many things mixing western and Japanese music, and we want to show that to the world.

One of the points of the tour this time, is to show what Japan has done with western music—in performance of western music and in composition of new works.

EIR: You have almost 2,000 students, including 200 in a special kindergarten music program. Why the gap between kindergarten and high school?

Uemura: In Japan, everyone can go to a public school very easily for free from grades one through junior high school, so we can't compete. To get into the best high schools, the exam competition becomes more difficult, so then we get students, at the high school level, when they also have to begin to choose a major.

We do have, for students in grades 1-8, a Saturday "academy," similar to Juilliard Prep, where students come every week to take lessons from the teachers at the school, with an eye toward later matriculation.

EIR: Maestro, tell us about your own training.

Hirokami: My parents were against my becoming a musician, because a musician never knows about his future. I was an only child, born in 1958, and at that point all boys, especially an only child, had to become businessmen; that's

why Japan is now so strong.

And it was also at that time when people in Japan first became interested in western music at all. I studied piano from the age of six, not so seriously, but when I was in junior high, I began talking about music, studying more seriously, then entered Tokyo College of Music for my university.

EIR: But how did you decide just from playing piano, that you wanted to be a conductor?

Hirokami: From the beginning I was planning to be a conductor! Basically, I just really like to move my arms; I felt I had a natural talent to express things with my body. Of course, then you must learn all the scores, the structure of all the music.

But before that, if you feel something, that when you are listening to music, you can move your body to it in a certain way, then this indicates an important natural talent for conducting.

EIR: Does that mean you also wanted to compose?

Hirokami: I tried that, but I had no talent for it. Even though I've now become a conductor, I'm not so sure that that was a good idea, either. The more my career advances, the more intense it becomes; now I have a European orchestra, I have a Japanese orchestra, and sometimes I really feel that my talent is too small for all this. But you must never give up!

I think that's the most important sentiment in music: Never give up! And that's what I've been trying to show the students, when I conduct them now, especially for this tour: No matter how tired you are, no matter how nervous you are, just keep on going, do your best!

This is my U.S. debut. When we first got to Chicago, the students didn't have the confidence to go on and play in Carnegie Hall—the Carnegie Hall debut was too big a dream. So I just kept telling them: Don't give up! And I have to be an example for them. This is my first time in America, too, I told them, I'm in the same boat as you. And I had all this conducting to do, I had teaching to do, I was exhausted—but they all know my history, that I'm from the same background as they are; I had to show them how to do it.

And if they continue to remember this trip, it will influence the rest of their lives, and help each of them to have a better life. That's really why, I think, we really made this tour, and these kids will remember this.

So this is exactly as Fukuzawa said, with all his ideas about the how to improve the individual mind. Because you have to do your best, to improve your mind. You can never give up, because music depends on every single individual's best possible personal effort.

I also want to thank the American people and the personnel in Chicago, Carnegie Hall, and here, for such a very warm welcome to the students and to me. Your hospitality was incredible for a student orchestra with an unknown young conductor, and we will never forget it.