

INTERVIEW

Maestro Junichi Hirokami and President Yasukazu Uemurai, Tokyo College of Music

‘Musical ideas must be created within the *individual* mind’

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 College’s Orchestra toured the U.S. in November for the second time only in its history, playing at Orchestra Hall, Chicago; debuting at Carnegie Hall, New York; and performing at Washington’s Kennedy Center.

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 (grades 9-12), 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, D.C. on November 17, 1993.

Fidelio: Tokyo College of Music was founded 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

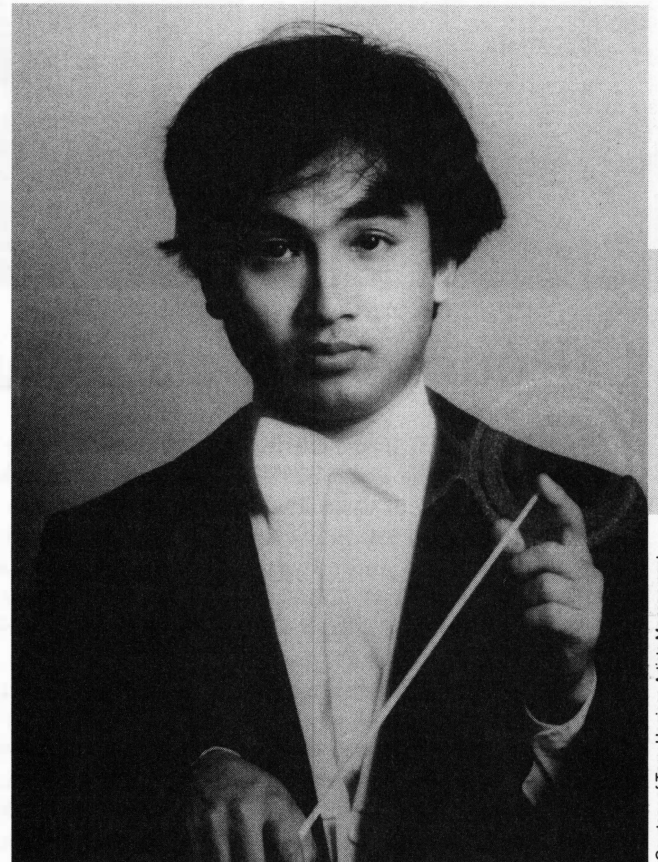
will become professionals. Others would become workers or housewives. However, by studying music, through this development of the heart, the personal strength of the individual, and the contribution one can make to society are advanced.

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

Hirokami: Yes, we want to give this basic education 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 U.S. 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.

Fidelio: One of the fathers of the Meiji



Maestro Junichi Hirokami

Courtesy of Terry Harrison Artists Management

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 a similar idea 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 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

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exchange programs, and the purpose is to make these young people feel that they are an important part of the world, not just of Japan.

Fidelio: Fukuzawa also said that what really interested him in the large canons which U.S. Commodore Perry had on the ships which he brought 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.

Fidelio: You have almost 2,000 students, including 200 in a special kindergarten music program. Why the gap between

kindergarten and senior high?

Uemura: In Japan, everyone can go to a public school very easily for free from first grade 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. And we do have, for students in grades 1-8, a Saturday “Academy,” like

Juilliard Prep, where students come every week.

Fidelio: 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 that 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 school, I began talking about music, studying more seriously, and then entered Tokyo College of Music for my university.

Fidelio: 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 natur-

al talent for conducting.

Fidelio: 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 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—I sometimes 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 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 at the Kennedy Center, 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.