

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-9
Young Composers and Mr. Watanabe

28 Uguisudani-machi
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Dick:

Art produce from the past tends to be a comfortable experience because its methods are often familiar, a safe experience because its challenge (if, indeed, it ever raised one) has been met in remote places, and finally - perhaps most significantly - it is a respectable experience because its value has been certified by the sieve of time and the laurels of commentators. For most advanced societies, it is a truism that the honored art of its past must be preserved. The process of preservation is broadly institutionalized. Governments can be expected to support and maintain their country's cultural heritage even when the public taste has ceased to demand or understand it. This is certainly true in Japan.

Although assimilation has always been a prime factor in the evolution of Japanese culture, its effect was strongest during the centuries when Chinese and Korean influences stimulated, redirected, and shaped the taste of Japanese patrons and, hence, the artists. More recently, in their encounter with the West, the Japanese have tended to separate adopted procedures from traditional ones.

There is a "Japanese Painting" and "Oil Painting," Japanese Music and Western Music. Each discipline sponsors a separate training system and these produce specialists. The Japanese orchestral flutist is not likely to know much about the technique and literature of the shakuhachi (a recorder-like instrument capable of stunning subtlety and power), while a flutist for the traditional Noh Drama will probably not be acquainted with either the Western flute or its staple Bach Sonatas. Not only is area study compartmentalized, but, until recently, the two traditions (Japanese and Western) were not even taught under the same roof. After the Second World War, a department of Japanese Music was formed at the Tokyo University of the Arts (the only governmentally supported school for the arts), but it is only one of several departments - and the smallest at that.

Toward the primary traditional forms - Noh, Bunraku, Kabuki, and Gagaku - the Japanese government has been responsive. It has even sponsored a recently completed National Theater in Tokyo with special facilities for traditional productions under the best possible circumstances. The building is somewhat controversial architecturally, being a compromise between traditional and modern concepts, but seems ideal from the spectator's point of view. Further, the government has certified a number of objects, places, and persons (!) as "national treasures," while others have been designated "important treasures." In effect, financial and social stability is legislated for the "items" concerned.

The contemporary artist who is working in the field of "Western style" art or music is both more and less fortunate. In the large cities, there are numerous galleries which distribute paintings, prints, and sculpture, and they cover a wide gamut of taste. There are, apparently, the normal paths from obscurity to recognition via prizes and/or notorious activities; stature, with its accompanying income, makes relative gentlemen out of most youthful experimentalists here as elsewhere. The artist and sculptor's advantage over the musician is and has been, of course, the production of objects. Having made something which can be bought and owned, he is at least potentially solvent, given talent and a sufficient sense of and for his time. Galleries have stables, publish catalogs, advertise, entertain visiting critics and potential buyers in familiar fashion. If an artist has a success, he is likely to find some means of moving to New York or Paris, too likely it sometimes seems.

The composer normally requires a very much longer period of time than the artist in order to produce one "composition" and even then (except in the case of electronic music) has to secure a performance before the merits of his work can emerge. In no case can the product, successful or not, be possessed. No one buys a symphony. In fact, no one is willing to pay very much to buy the privilege of hearing a new or unfamiliar piece of music, much less to own a recording of it. The pressure for fresh invention upon today's composers is much stronger than on their colleagues in the plastic arts. A painter or sculptor with a striking or novel idea can safely allow it to proliferate both because it represents one view, one "performance" if you will, of a central idea, image or outlook. A musical work is performed more or less diversely and widely on the basis of a single score or master plan, thus diversity is built in. The composer is restrained by contemporary techniques and fashion from generating dozens of sonatas or symphonies in the manner of his predecessors.

These conditions are understood by most composers as simple matters of fact, however regrettable. Having accepted them, he asks essentially one thing: time in which to work. But this commodity - albeit minimal - is not always easy to come by. Some countries provide governmental support, others

help through private foundations, and in some it is possible to combine practical and personal work. It is notable, incidentally, that private sponsorship in the sense of individual sponsorship of musical works has almost disappeared (though the wealthy avidly collect art objects which can be considered investments), and with it has declined a most important factor: the exercise of a connoisseur's individual judgement (as opposed to collective and thereby compromised choice).

In Japan, neither the government nor private foundations do much in the way of assisting young composers to develop their abilities through time in which to work or opportunity for public or private hearings. There are some teaching positions, of course, and composers here do have an important inter-industrial freedom. They may make a living by writing for television, movies, and radio, and still - if they are facile enough - find time to devote to "serious" personal projects. In the United States, this is not generally true. The worlds of Broadway, Hollywood, and television are more or less separate and inviolate. One belongs or one does not, and each is an exhausting, if financially rewarding, master.

But free-lancing, even where possible, is not an entirely satisfactory compromise, since bread-and-butter work generally involves rush (total time) commitments, deadlines, and all the associated strains and compromises. One dare not reject a proposal for fear another ready source cannot be found. These factors are particularly meaningful in an age like our own which lacks a speed-producing "common practice" (the shared conventions which surely guide the ear of a composer to effective rearrangements of more or less familiar sound patterns). The fragmented life which free-lance composing demands is also hard on large scale compositions, forcing compromise or truncation.

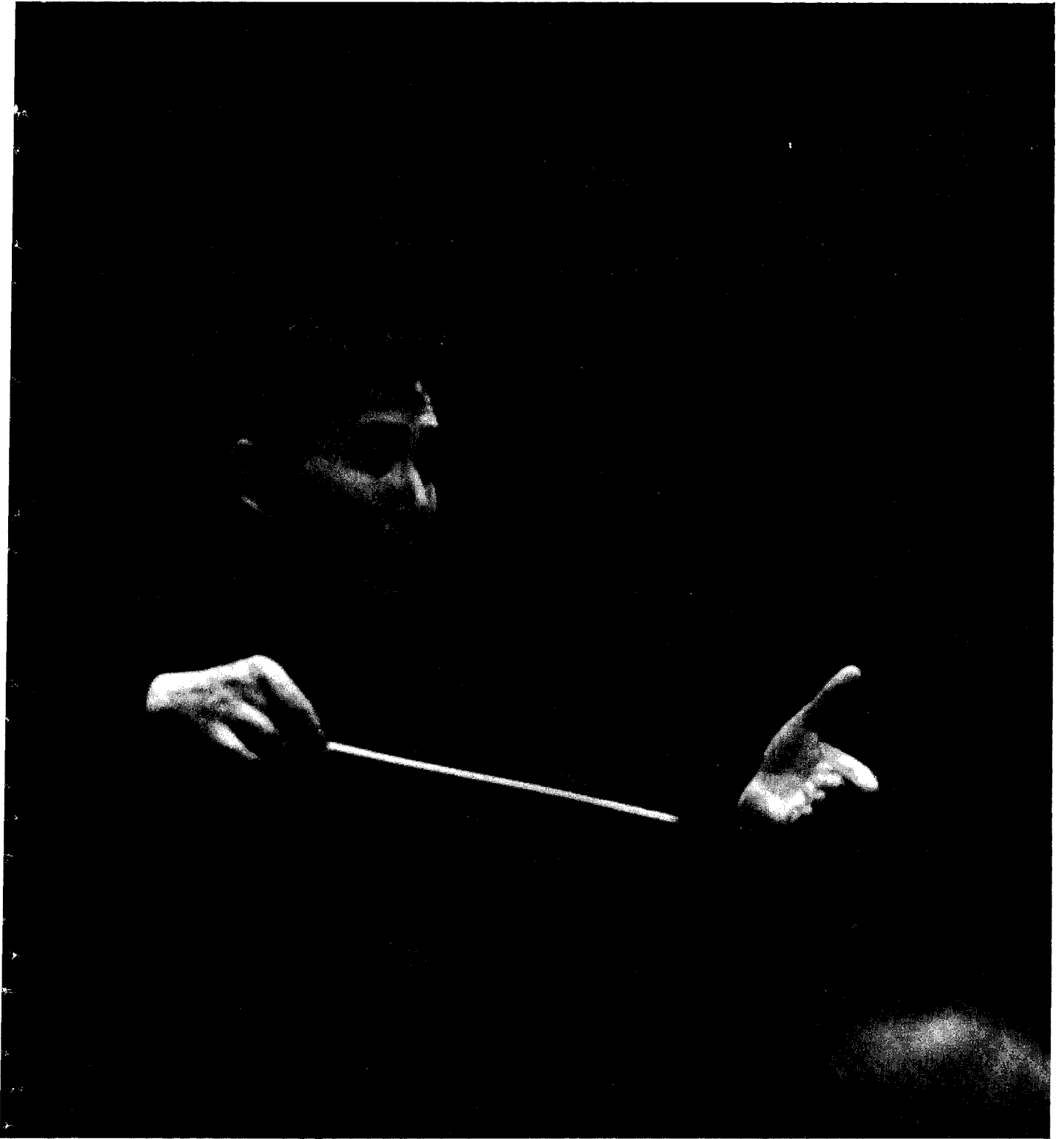
Commissions supply one entirely satisfactory answer to the dilemma. They differ from prizes in the important feature that they award a stipend before rather than after the fact. The composer is allowed to set aside a certain period of months (depending on the amount of money involved and the dimension of the planned work) which can then be devoted to completing some project. A commission is an expression of confidence. It offers the enticement of a secure performance commitment and allows one to work relatively free of distraction. These are important matters because without a structure of supports, a composer is apt to avoid difficult musical entanglements. Ease, on the other hand, is not a natural feature of the contemporary musical environment.

The above fanfare is offered by way of assuring that the subject of this report be properly assessed as the important factor it certainly is in contemporary Japanese musical life.

- 1957 *Toshiro Mayuzumi:
PHONOLOGIE SYMPHONIQUE
- 1958 Akio Yashiro: SYMPHONY
*Ryuta Ito: CONCERTO FOR JAPANESE FLUTES
- 1959 Michio Mamiya: VIOLIN CONCERTO
Yoshiro Irino: SYMPHONY
*Kiyoshige Koyama: NOH MASKS
- 1960 Akira Miyoshi:
THREE SYMPHONIC MOVEMENTS
Minao Shibata: SINFONIA
- 1961 Toru Takemitsu: MUSIC OF TREE
*Kiyoshige Koyama: SYMPHONIC POEM
- 1962 Sado Bekku: SYMPHONY No. 1
*Toru Takemitsu: CORAL ISLAND
- 1963 Toshiro Mayuzumi: ESSAY FOR STRINGS
Naozumi Yamamoto: RHAPSODY FOR JAPANESE
INSTRUMENTS AND ORCHESTRA
*Yoritsune Matsudaira:
TWO MOVEMENTS FROM BUGAKU
- 1964 Yasuji Kiyose: SKETCH OF JAPAN
Sabura Takada: "WORDLESS TEARS"
(POEMS BY KENJI MIYAZAWA)
- 1965 Komei Abe: SYMPHONETTA
Teizo Matsumura: SYMPHONY
- 1966 Makoto Moroi: SYMPHONIC SKETCHES
("CAIN AND ABEL")
Michio Mamiya: DOUBLE CONCERTO GROSSO
Teruyuki Noda: SYN FONIE Op. 8
- 1967 Yusushi Akutagawa: OSTINATO SINFONICA
*Joji Yuasa: PROJECTION FOR KOTOS AND
ORCHESTRA (FLOWER, BIRD, WIND,
MOON)

Above: A list of the Japan Philharmonic
and Bunka Network (*) Commissions

Right: Conductor Akeo Watanabe in
rehearsal



In 1956, Akeo Watanabe approached the incoming director of the Nihon Cultural Broadcasting System, Shigeo Mizuno, with the proposal that he sponsor the creation of a new orchestra. Mr. Mizuno agreed, and the Japan Philharmonic began concerts the following Spring. The orchestra, under Watanabe's direction, has given ten full seasons of concerts since that time and made dozens of recordings. Its membership is entirely Japanese with the exception of the concertmasters - formerly Broadus Erle and presently Louis Graeler.

Mr. Watanabe was trained at the Tokyo University of the Arts, where he is presently senior professor of conducting, and has Japanese and Finnish ancestry. He speaks quietly, confidently, and with modest pride about the achievements of his orchestra. In our meetings, I was particularly interested in hearing about the 10-year old commissioning series which the Japan Philharmonic has sponsored. Watanabe explained that the program has been a basic part of his plan for the orchestra from its inception. Like a few of his clear-headed colleagues, Watanabe believes that, without the support of contemporary products of superior quality, the orchestra can survive as a live part of our culture "only another thirty to fifty years." Unless, that is, composers continue to produce music which reflects contemporary society, its values and methods, the orchestra will soon join the museum as an archive rather than a forum. (It is my own opinion that even the most admirable orchestral institutions are already in the final stages of this process.)

Another incentive for the commission series was Watanabe's belief that in order to achieve a more genuine understanding of the Western music tradition, the Japanese audience needs the experience of native excellence; that, projected with the insights and craft of a Japanese composer, Western approaches (if not styles and materials) might appear in a more revealing light. Being the largest vehicle for Western musical expression, the orchestra will also accept the widest range of approaches. Attempts at "orchestrating" traditional Japanese musical materials strike Watanabe as being self-conscious and somewhat artificial just as the inclusion of Oriental ingredients by some Western composers strikes us as exotic (in the strict sense of "not fully acclimatized"). The most desirable goal, he feels, is the gradual emergence of a music which, though internationally intelligible, retains evidences of the special manners and outlooks of the nation whose artists produced it. Mr. Watanabe does not condemn nationalistic work, however, and points out that composers abstract and nationalistic have always coexisted. Nonetheless, the impression one gets from looking at his orchestra's programs is that he prefers a more "abstract" and international approach.

The commission program began with the admirable objective of providing the equivalent of six months' living expenses for each award. Cost of living has risen since 1957, though, and

Watanabe regrets that the commission stipend has not been able to keep pace. The amount still is substantial; exceeding that given in the United States in most cases. The composer is allowed from four to six months to complete his composition - and Watanabe smilingly noted that the FULL time is always consumed - the tradition of the wet-ink rush to the final rehearsal is observed here as elsewhere. Unlike many conductors, Watanabe invites - encourages - the composer to attend all rehearsals and is pleased to have him comment. If the composer's idea differs from the conductor's, he usually receives a demonstration. If he persists, the conductor will accept his view.

On this point, Watanabe observed, composers fall into two broad classes: those who encourage him to take whatever expressive "liberties" he feels appropriate and those who desire a performance exactly tailored to the score. While many conductors inhibit comment in one way or another (grouping all composers into the acquiescent class - even if by default), Watanabe's technical clarity and personal graciousness probably allow a quite direct exchange of views. He is a careful student of the scores he conducts, whether Handel or Mayuzumi, and one gets from his performances and tapes of contemporary music a welcome and encouraging impression of authority. This is due not only to skill but to attitude. It is unreasonable to expect, says Watanabe, that we should feel immediately comfortable with the style and content of a genuinely contemporary musical expression, and he is delighted when the composer is available for questions.

The list on page 4 includes not only the 17 Japan Philharmonic commissions, but an additional 7 (*) from the sponsoring Bunka Network. The awards are made by a committee including the orchestra's manager, orchestra members, and the conductor, but the primary responsibility for suggestion and final decision has consistently been with Watanabe (an excellent instance of individual taste in action).

A few notes should be appended to the list. Approximately half of the composers were young (under thirty) and relatively unknown when they received commissions. Overall, age at commissioning runs from twenty-five to the mid-sixties. Less than a quarter of the pieces use traditional Japanese musical materials (though the impetus may be Japanese), and one of those which does, Yamamoto's RHAPSODY, includes just as conspicuously elements of jazz improvisation. The importance of the opportunity which these commissions provide for the younger composers is attested by the scale on which most of them decide to work. Mayuzumi, Miyoshi, Moroi, Noda, and Takemitsu all produced works running in excess of twenty-five minutes. These products represent major steps in development, steps which in all probability could not have been taken - certainly not at such an early stage - without the multiple support of Watanabe's commissions. Awards and contests are welcome, but commissions put the respective responsibilities where they ought to be.

The Japan Philharmonic intended to issue all performances in disk recordings through Japanese Columbia, but this has not been possible as yet. A number of recordings have been issued, and, significantly, all performances are taped and available to the composers. Conductor Watanabe has also given many of the essential repeat performances of his commissions in Japan and as guest conductor in America and Europe.

There remains the question of evaluating the music itself, granted that the project is impressive on paper. It is a pleasure to report that hours of tape listening revealed a high level of quality both in terms of skill and content. Watanabe himself has been generally pleased with the result of his choices, and I understand that the orchestra has been fully cooperative. Having attended several of the premieres, I can testify to the genuine enthusiasm of the audiences. The most substantial and ambitious works include Takemitsu's MUSIC OF TREE and CORAL ISLAND, Matsumura's SYMPHONY, Mayuzumi's PHONOLOGIE SYMPHONIQUE, and THREE SYMPHONIC MOVEMENTS by Akira Miyoshi. These works have the strength and relevance to make a strong impression on concert programs anywhere. And many of the conservative and modest products of the older generation have an honesty and craft which one can admire.

With the exception of several members of the avant garde - notably Toshi Ichihyanagi and Yuji Takahashi - the list of commissions would seem not only catholic but quite complete. The precision of Watanabe's taste can be estimated by the fact the two composers who first received second invitations - though at the time in formative stages - have now indisputably emerged as Japan's leading composers: Takemitsu and Mayuzumi. They have both received widespread performance in Europe and America, are published by C. F. Peters Corporation of New York, and have many recordings to their credit.

There is no question in my mind about the importance which an early and repeated vote of confidence before the fact can have, by providing the one essential condition in which a composer can come to serious grips with his work: time. No number of stolen hours after a crowded teaching schedule, between appointments or free-lance assignments, no collection of interims, in short, can provide the quality of insight and consistency essential to the optimum results.

Sincerely,



Roger Reynolds