

## The dream of Japanese opera, at award presentation

HAGI Kyoko (delegate of the Opera theatre Konnyakuza)

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We would like to express our sincere gratitude for being awarded this time.

Our activities stem from the achievements which the Late Professor Koizumi, for whom we have a great regard, had built up. We feel very moved by this. Thank you for your high appreciation of the Opera theatre Konnyakuza.

Please, let me introduce myself. I am a composer, HAGI Kyoko, a delegate and a music director of this theatre. Today, I'd like to introduce the aim of the theatre's foundation and our works under the title of "the dream of Japanese opera". Besides that, as we have a precious opportunity here today, we would also like to show you some scenes from our opera through our singer-actor, Mr. OISHI's performances.

"The dream of Japanese opera" is also a book title of Mr. HAYASHI Hikaru, who passed away two years ago. Hayashi, one of Japan's leading composers, led Konnyakuza as a music and art director from 1975 up until his death. He was a regular composer of our theater, and created in total 25 large and small works. He called himself a "*zatsuki-sakkyokuka* (composer)". This name was likely conceived by Hayashi from "*zatsuki-sakka* (writer)", which is a term used to describe a regular writer belonging to a particular theatrical group. When he started leading the Konnyakuza, he wanted to tread in the steps of CHIKAMATSU Monzaemon, a famous Japanese dramatist and a "*zatsuki-sakka*" in the Edo period. I became involved as the second regular composer in 1979. So, we have developed Konnyakuza's activities with two composers, myself and Hayashi. Our aim has always been to create a real "Japanese opera" which is rooted in Japanese regional characteristics and cultural heritage, in the same manner that the Italian, German and Russian operas are.

When it comes to the introduction of our theatre, konnyaku-taiso (*konjac* exercise) must first be explained. Konnyaku-taiso, to which the theatre owes its name, is a nickname of an exercise, led by Mr. NOGUCHI Michizo and Ms. MIYAGAWA Mutsuko in PE class at the Tokyo University of the Arts. Both are now unfortunately no longer with us. Konnyaku-taiso includes various actions, for example, one encourages a flexible body, another promotes instantaneous actions etc. This exercise has not only health benefits but also helps with operatic expressions. Students, who found the exercise and considered it crucial to development of learning operatic expressions, established a konnyaku taiso club with Ms. Miyagawa's support. It became the predecessor of Konnyakuza.

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The students questioned about the state of operas at that time. Operas performed in Japan were not attractive, they were boring. They needed to become much more interesting in order to attract a wide audience. Why were Japanese operas boring? What did they lack? There were many shortcomings which needed to be covered. Among them, lack of theatrical appeal and inaudible lyrics were the most serious problems.

During the 1960's in Japan, although almost all operas were performed in Japanese, their lyrics were not easy to hear. Most operas involved large men or women singing monotonously without acting, and naturally, they developed a bad reputation. The konnyaku taiso is effective in helping to produce a flexible body which is suitable for acting. This was the common view of the students, and so, the konnyaku taiso club started. Ms. Miyagawa, who instructed the students, also had questioned about Japanese operas at that time. As she wanted opera singers to shape their acting skills, she willingly supported this club for 12 years prior to her retirement.

The students who had initially founded the club, of course eventually graduated from the school, and set out to create their ideal professional theatre. They wanted to forever continue performing and showing wide audiences their 'ideal operas' through a combination of easy to hear lyrics and through showing the beauty in their theatrical movements.

Back then, they decided that they needed to start expanding their audiences and educating more people about their operas in order for them to develop. As a starting point, they decided to focus on teaching children how fun and enjoyable opera can be. They organized school tours mainly in elementary, middle high and high schools. To begin with, they all worked day jobs in order to afford to buy a bus. In 1971, they started touring, taking stage props with them and supplies and living on the bus. Around this time, they began to pay themselves a wage, (although initially very small), and strive harder towards their goal of being able to live solely from opera. They named the theatre "Konnyakuza", because, they wanted to reference konnyaku taiso as the origin of their expressions.

Their aims in establishing their theater were:

- To create more sophisticated operas focusing on development of the music and drama.
- To perform operas which were rooted in Japanese culture and in Japanese language.
- To polish Japanese singing skills
- To become independent as a professional theatre, whilst also promoting themselves and their audiences.

I will now move on, to talk about works which have been performed in our theatre.

Since the foundation, Konnyakuza members never intended to perform foreign operas. They thought that they needed to solely perform operas composed in Japanese to give operas a grounding in Japanese society. However, in the early days of the foundation, they did not meet any composers who were able to contribute their compositions. Therefore, the members selected suitable older works to play at schools from a collection of around 100 pieces of previously composed Japanese operas. At that time, operas composed in Japan were known as "created opera", and, their subject was derived mainly from folktales. Konnyakuza chose works based on folk tales such as "*Amanjaku* and *Urikohime*" composed by Hayashi Hikaru, and "*Old tale, Taro, a*

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*people trafficker*” composed by Mamiya Michio etc., then performed them through out the country.

“*Amanjaku and Urikohime*”, which is full of operatic elements, is an entertaining introductory work. Hayashi composed the conversation of an elderly couple as a *recitative* at the beginning of the opera, realizing the pleasure to sing spoken languages.

Now, please listen to Mr. Oishi’s singing.

♪ An elderly couple’s conversation, from “*Amanjaku and Urikohime*”

Thank you for listening.

In 1971, Hayashi saw “*Amanjaku and Urikohime*” performed by Konnyakuza for the first time at an elementary school in Hokkaido. Children were glued to the stage, they cheered for or jeered against characters, and were on the edge of their seats during the play. Hayashi looked back on that time and said: “A gym evolved into a playhouse, and my composition existed solely as a form of traditional performing arts. When I composed this work, I dreamed to witness the lively relationship between singers and audiences, but at the same time, I never thought it could ever be realized. So, I was really moved that my dream came true.” At that time, Hayashi gave his word to compose works for Konnyakuza, and became its musical director. Since then, he became involved in our theatre as a regular composer. For Konnyakuza, meeting with Hayashi was a big event. If we had not met him, Konnyakuza would have turned out completely differently. We cannot begin to imagine how Konnyakuza would have existed without Hayashi.

Through the cooperation with Hayashi, as aforementioned, the first works we created were all based on folktales. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by Bertolt Brecht, performed in 1978 was a big leap away from this theme. We can say that drastic changes in theme and influence occurred within just a couple of years after the initial meeting with Hayashi. In this work, *arias* were replaced by “songs”<sup>ii</sup>, which contributed to relativising opera scenes.

In 1979, I began to participate as a regular composer.

At around that time, we began making operas from MIYAZAWA Kenji’s works. I have made many operas based on his works and have always been convinced that Japanese language can be used as a driving force to create unprecedented music. Operas made using Miyazawa Kenji’s texts not only have regional characteristics basing on the Iwate dialect, but go much further to creating musical sound far more powerful than could have been imagined to have been derived from other Japanese writer’s works. Many Japanese did not think Japanese language was a suitable opera text--but this was bias. The proof comes from the unrivaled musical power and magical rhythm and identity that come through from the use of Kenji’s texts. I think that the works of Hayashi and myself acquired Japanese opera’s true identities by wrestling against Kenji’s texts.

Subsequently, we tried to create operas based on Shakespeare’s works including *The Twelfth Night*, *The Hamlet’s time* etc. which were co-composed by Hayashi and myself. Although Shakespeare’s work was set in an age far different from the society of today, through the quality of the drama and its nature to describe individual personalities, we can connect to characters as if they were present today, transcending both time and space. Both dramas and operas are expected to produce this power, and we are sure that we can fully exercise this through the works

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of Shakespeare.

After that, our range of works ever-widened. We made many operas based on modern Japanese writer's works including "*Konjikiyasha*" by OZAKI Koyo, "*I am a cat*" by NATSUME Soseki and "*Nigorie*" by HIGUCHI Ichiyo, as well as Russian writers including Chekhov and Gogol. A strong relationship between script writer, director and other workers ensured the success of these works.

Konnyakuza owes what it is to the devotion and reliable nature of its team, though it nearly closed down several times. Today, we have about 50 members. Nowadays, we perform a couple of works per year in Tokyo – as this is where all of our activities are based. Simultaneously we perform six to seven different works whilst touring around the rest of Japan. In total we carry out around 250 performances each year. For many of our audiences, it is often their first time to ever hear an opera. During one performance at a high school, students told us afterwards, "We did not know that opera was such an interesting thing!". Hearing such feedback, we are convinced in the significance of our activities.

Let me introduce myself here. When I was a student of the composition department at Tokyo University of the Arts, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend lectures of Mr. Koizumi's. We were a very lucky generation. At that time, I worried about what I could contribute as a composer in future years, and where 20<sup>th</sup> century music was to go. Koizumi let me know that there were various kinds of music in the world, and to me, his lectures suggested that we should recognize non-Western music's significance to breakthrough the lack of development of Western music. I foresaw the integration of music and drama creating a new kind of music. After being affected by Mr. Koizumi, I began to deconstruct Western music. I watched *kabuki*, *bunraku*, shows at underground theaters and various performances one after another. I also tried to learn *noh*, *kyogen*, the *shamisen* and jazz. Eventually, I found myself becoming fascinated by the human body itself. At just the right time, coincidentally I happened to see a poster of Konnyakuza, and spontaneously joined. That was the beginning at my first encounter with the Konnyakuza and subsequently has led to my present activities.

To conclude my speech, I would like to talk about our performances overseas.

Since 1999, Konnyakuza has had overseas performing tours seven times, visiting five European countries and eight Asian countries. *Gauche the Cellist*, based on an original novel of Miyazawa Kenji, was performed in Festival d'Avignon, France, and during the Asian tours. This work evoked a strong sense of emotion amongst those who were new to Miyazawa's works and Japanese operas. We also performed three times in Indonesia and Thailand with our operas of *Teto the Robot* and *Pinocchio*. During these years, we met some audiences who had really been looking forward to watching our operas. During the tours in Central Europe, we performed *Metamorphosis* based on the novel of Franz Kafka. Its script was reconstructed in Japanese by Japanese script writer YAMAZAKI Kiyota. However, the music composed by Hayashi retained elements showcasing the best aspects of Western music of the time. European audiences were surprised at this opera, and highly praised our performance. Having such positive responses both in Japan and overseas, we feel that our theatre has the potential to growing and developing.

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Such positive feedback highlights the power of our work and the competence of our performances. It also proves that there are many audiences eager to watch and enjoy our 'ideal' Japanese operas, created by Hayashi Hikaru.

In 2001, the 40<sup>th</sup> year celebrating of the foundation of our theatre, we published an anniversary book, *Operas of Konnyakuza*. It is a very indepth book with a CD. We would like to give a copy to each presenter here today. Please have a read through it and develop further understanding about Konnyakuza.

We will continue to keep following our dream. We are so delighted to have received this award and feel furthermore inspired to keep growing and developing.

And now, please listen to Mr. OISHI's singing once more.

♪To be, or not to be, from *The Hamlet's time*

♪Stupid human beings, from *Magemon*

Finally, please listen to a theme song of Konnyakuza, which we frequently performed whilst on our tour bus.

♪Our opera house

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<sup>i</sup> OISHI Tetsufumi, sub-delegate, *utayakusha* (singer-actor) of the Opera theatre Konnyakuza

<sup>ii</sup> Ordinary *arias* of opera appeal to audience's emotions, but "songs" promote audiences to recognize not only the effect on their emotions but also understand far more about the characters and events within the performances. That is relativising of opera. The origin of the term 'songs' comes from their usage in Brecht's works, and has been developed by Konnyakuza.<sup>ii</sup>