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Western classical music in a non-Western culture: The repertoires of Japanese professional orchestras in the twentieth century



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors that contributed to the development of Western orchestral music repertoires in non-Western nations, with a particular focus on Japan. Japan introduced Western music under the direct government involvement in the early 1900s, and it spread rapidly nationwide for a brief period after World War II (1945 onward). While previous studies have discussed repertoires of Western music in the context of Western society, this study empirically analyses Japanese professional orchestras' concerts and provides an example of repertoires of Western music in a completely different historical and cultural context. My findings indicate that three factors reduced the concentration of the Western orchestral repertoires of a small number of canonic composers: orchestras' increased performance capabilities, their financial stability, and local economic growth. I also identify three factors that contributed to the introduction of new and/or other Japanese composers to established repertoires: orchestras' increased performance capabilities, their financial stability, and the government's cultural policies.

1. Introduction

A problem that emerges when considering how Western music repertoires have developed in non-Western countries is a lack of perspective, despite the fact that non-Western countries are important bases for both the demand and supply of classical music today. Among non-Western countries, East Asian musicians from Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea, as well as Asian Americans, in particular, seem to be reliably involved in the production and reproduction of classical music repertoires,¹ and show an increasingly large presence in conservatories, concert halls, and major international competitions in the West.

Previous studies have considered the repertoires of classical music in the historical context of modern Western societies (Goehr, 1992; Kerman, 1985; Reimer, 1986; Weber, 1984; Weber, 1999; Weber, 2001; Weber, 2008), especially by focusing on the emergence of “the canonization of dead composers” and “the formation of a musical repertoire of transcendent masterpieces” (Goehr, 1992: 247).² “The rise of a canon of great works from the past” has brought “one of the most fundamental transformations in Western musical culture” (Weber, 1999: 336). That is to say, concert programs thereby shifted “from miscellany to homogeneity” (Weber, 2001: 127) around the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and classical music began to “achieve hegemony” (Weber, 2008: 235–272) during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the musical canons developed in Europe were taken to the United States by intellectuals and musicians, beginning in

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¹ For example, Seiji Ozawa, Toru Takemitsu, Tan Dun, Midori, Lang Lang, Sarah Chang are prominent Asian musicians worldwide. Recent studies that considered the relationship between classical music and Asian (and Asian American) are as follows: Yang (2007), Yoshihara (2007), Leppänen (2015).

² For the terms ‘classics’ and ‘canon,’ I follow Weber’s (1999: 338) definition: “[The] ‘classics’ are individual works deemed great; ‘canon’ is the framework that supports their identification in critical and ideological terms.

the mid-nineteenth century, but for most American listeners at that time, “serious’ orchestral music was still exotic.” The earliest musical organizations in the United States existed largely for commercial purposes (DiMaggio, 1991; Levine, 1988), and “orchestra musicians, conductors, and promoters offered a heterogeneous repertory” (Spitzer, ed., 2012: 21). Later, “institutions of high culture emerged as part of a larger process of upper-class formation by urban elites familiar with recent European precedents” (DiMaggio, 1991: 135); “an exalted body of musical works” (i.e., a musical canon) was widely accepted by the early 1900s, when non-profit orchestras were common in large cities across the United States (DiMaggio, 1987a; DiMaggio, 1987b; DiMaggio, 1991).³

On the other hand, the question of how non-Western countries have participated in Western classical music culture has not yet attracted much attention in academic discussions, with the exception of a few examples. Several recent studies focusing on Asians and classical music have challenged the notion of “the abstract nature” of Western music that transcends historical and geographical boundaries, and have considered non-Western countries’ acceptance of Western music from the perspective of Western Imperialism and “modern nation building, often framed by Western nationalist ideologies” (Yang 2007: 1–3; Yoshihara, 2007). This study explores the factors that contributed to the development of Western orchestral music repertoires in twentieth-century Japan, and tries to provide a different perspective of a non-Western nation’s acceptance of Western music.

The background for Japan’s acceptance of Western music was quite different from circumstances in Europe and the United States, where Western music had always been inherent in the culture. Japan introduced Western music from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century under direct government involvement, and it spread rapidly nationwide for a brief period of time after World War II (1945 onward). The acceptance of Western music in Japan has been promoted, while being strictly related to the following historical, political, social, economic, and cultural contexts specific to Japan: (1) modernization and Westernization for the purpose of nation-state building in the early stages, (2) political use of Western music in Imperialist policy in East Asia and nationalism before and during World War II, (3) formation of class-consciousness both of urban, upper-middle class intellectuals in the early 1900s and of the expanding middle class from the postwar reconstruction to the high economic growth period, and, (4) aspiration to Western musical culture by the general public in Japan consistently seen throughout these times.

In the early stage when Western music was introduced to Japan, the main factor was modernization and Westernization for the purpose of a nation-state building. During the Edo period (1603–1868), there had been hardly any cultural intercourse with foreign countries for almost 300 years, due to *sakoku*, the Tokugawa Shogunate’s policy of national isolation. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), which represented the political conversion from the Tokugawa Shogunate to the Meiji era (1868–1912), the new Meiji government promoted a policy of modernization and introduced Western culture into Japanese society. During the Meiji era, governments and intellectuals were aspiring to adopt Western music for educational and cultural institutions, due to the Westernization of the state; that is, the progress of the state. The Ministry of Education introduced a compulsory education system and singing education (from 1872); children were obliged to sing *shoka*, a collection of songs created based on Western tonal harmonies and melodies and written in staff notation, with the accompaniment of the organ or piano. This Western-based singing education became the basis for creating citizens who could sing the national anthem together (the representation of a centralized state), and who were eager not only to listen to but also to perform Western classical music themselves (the formation of a musical taste for Western classical music). In addition, during the period before the defeat of World War II, Japan enacted its singing education also in colonial Taiwan (from 1895) and Korea (from 1910), for the formation of nationalism in the colonies.

Regarding the acceptance of orchestral music, the Meiji government has introduced Western orchestral music (or brass bands) to the Department of Music of the Imperial Household Ministry, military bands, and the government-affiliated Tokyo Music School.⁴ Following the government’s initial introduction of Western orchestral music, the dissemination of orchestras continued between the Taisho era (1912–1926) and the prewar Showa era (1927–1930s). In the early 1900s, the younger generation of urban, upper-middle class intellectuals, who went to university under the prewar education system and were the adherents of Western music, promoted the reception of orchestral music and founded amateur orchestral organizations. After World War II, the popularization of orchestral music expanded further. Professional orchestras began to spread in urban areas nationwide, and the middle class⁵ who lived in the cities became a consumer of classical music. Japanese orchestras, both amateur and professional, especially contributed to the “dissemination of Western music while promoting the canonization of repertoires” (Tokumaru & Aoyama, 2003, 136–138), in response to the musical taste of audience as classical music enthusiasts. In this way, Japan accepted the orchestral music repertoire formed throughout the 19th century in Europe at twice the speed in the beginning of the 20th century.

As mentioned above, Japan accepted and developed a repertoire of Western music in a completely different historical, political and cultural context compared to Western countries. However, the reality of urban intellectuals in the early 1900s in Japan promoting both the acceptance of a musical canon and the establishment of orchestras is similar to that of the U.S., where the upper-middle class urban elite was involved in the formation of “high culture” and the establishment of “nonprofit organizations” (DiMaggio, 1987b; DiMaggio, 1991). Therefore, research on Japan is appropriate when considering similarities and differences between non-Western countries and Europe or the United States in the formation of musical repertoires. At the same time, it will serve as a reference case for the study of acceptance of orchestral music in East Asian and other non-Western countries.

This study shares the research interest and analytical approach with Dowd, Liddle, Lupo, and Borden (2002), that is informed by

³ Levine (1988) provides a discussion of the “sacralization” of culture in late nineteenth-century America.

⁴ The school was originally established as the Ongaku Torishirabe Gakari (Institute of Music) in 1879, as part of the Ministry of Education, and was elevated to the status of Tokyo Music School in 1887. Today, the institution is known as the Tokyo University of the Arts.

⁵ In the case of postwar Japan, the “middle class” refers to those who have a “middle-class consciousness.” They appeared as “consumers,” along with the establishment of a mass consumer society, during the period of high economic growth. People with a “middle-class consciousness” represented over 70% of the population at the end of the 1950s and exceeded 90% in the first half of the 1970s (Cabinet Office, Overview of the Public Opinion Survey on the Life of the People).

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