

How 3 Months Behind Japan's Closed Borders Became 21 Concerts with 5 Orchestras

By John Axelrod, *Musical America*

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American conductor John Axelrod arrived in Kyoto, Japan, from Switzerland in time for the requisite ten-day quarantine before his appearance on the podium of the City of Kyoto Symphony Orchestra, November 27 and 28. His next scheduled engagement, with the Hyogo Performing Arts Center Orchestra in Hiroshima, was to be December 12 and, since Japan had just closed its borders due to the Omicron surge, he remained.

As it happened, several of the country's major orchestras, including Tokyo's big three, had some high-profile international conductors scheduled to appear in the coming months. With those maestros now unable to enter the country, Axelrod found himself in an exceptionally rare position: a foreign national conducting three consecutive programs with the NHK Symphony Orchestra and making his debuts with the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, all in the space of a few months. Herewith, his observations.

Three months behind closed borders due to the Omicron variant revealed some intriguing differences among the styles, personalities, and repertoire among Japan's orchestras—all witnessed from best seat in the house: the podium.

The City of Kyoto Symphony Orchestra, of which I am principal guest conductor, is based in a city whose cultural identity traces to the ancient seat of the emperor and the geisha district of Gion. The orchestra, among the best in western Japan, is as cultivated in color, rich in sound, noble in posture, and proud, as any capital should be. The November 27 and 28 concerts I led featured Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, with concertmaster Takashi Izuhara and the Germanic horn section leading the work to its climactic conclusion. But what stole the show was the premiere of *The Samurai of Seville*, by Jose Maria Gallardo del Rey, a double concerto for koto and Flamenco guitar, with a narrator, based on the 2017 novel by John J. Healey. Together, the two string instruments led the orchestra in the tale of the 22 Japanese warriors who sailed to Seville, Spain, in 1614. Most returned to Japan, but six stayed behind; their descendants survive them to this day.

On to Tokyo

The next stop on my unanticipated tour marked my debut on the podium of the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, which I found to be its own, complete instrument, shaped by its great Chief Conductor Kazushi Ono. The style of the orchestra is adventurous, curious, and precise. Never have I heard such a theatrical yet finely tuned Stravinsky *Firebird*--menacing, mesmerizing, and mellifluous.

The Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, next on my itinerary for no less than six performances, is led by Sebastian Weigle and so is very much a German tradition orchestra. Yusuke Hayashi and Kota Nagahara shared concertmaster duties for the annual *daiku*: Beethoven's Symphony 9, *Choral*. Among the six iterations, we together found new details and discoveries in this too often played masterpiece, making it an absolute pleasure.

I know the NHK Symphony Orchestra well, having a relationship a decade long. Our three

December and January programs included the annual Strauss waltzes and polkas for the New Year, coupled in a beautiful Viennese way with Mahler's 4th Symphony, sung by the radiant Maki Mori. Yomiuri Nippon concertmaster Kota Nagahara was with the NHK as guest concertmaster for the devilish dance of Mahler 4, and we forged an uncommon bond from working together with two different orchestras on two massive pieces in such a short period. NHK is virtuosic, on the level of Berlin and Vienna, New York and London. The experience was exhilarating.

And speaking of brilliant concertmasters, with the January 21 and 22 NHK concerts I finally had the opportunity to collaborate with Fuminori Maro Shinozaki, in Brahms's Third Symphony and the Bruch Violin Concerto. He is a great violinist, but also a respected leader who not only guides the NHK under its chief conductors, but also governs it with absolute professionalism. From the podium, a conductor can thus rest assured that the ensemble is prepared and will play with purpose. That is a pleasure that knows no limits.

The final programs with the NHK, Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5 and Piano Concerto No. 3 (with Takahiro Yoshikawa), January 26 and 27, might have demonstrated the sovereignty of the orchestra's repertoire, from Austro-Germanic to Russian, if an outbreak of Covid within the orchestra had not led to their cancelation.

With both the City of Kyoto Symphony Orchestra (January 28-31) and the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra (February 11), I conclude my Japan journey with Tchaikovsky's Symphony 4, arguably one of the greatest symphonic showpieces of the repertoire. I conducted it at one time on tour with the NHK and at the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, with the great Rainer Küchl of the Vienna Philharmonic as concertmaster. From that frame of reference, I've been able to compare and consult with the concertmasters of both orchestras to find a sound and style that matches the needs and mood of the moment. It's been an invaluable experience, and a completely unexpected one at that.

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