

From Baroque to Commedia in Japan

by Nobuko Yuasa

In May, I gave several concerts in Japan with Jeremy Badcock from Concert de Danse Baroque (CDDB).

This year, the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, has inspired many musicians with an idea to have concerts themed on Mozart. One of them was the Okayama Philharmonic Orchestra concert held in Okayama, my hometown. The concert was titled '*Dear Amadeus; please fill me with your music*'. I was requested to dance there. It was a concert for all fans of the classic music, with the programme picking up popular Mozart opera arias, miscellaneous pieces and a piano concerto. A wonderful tenor returned from Italy to be M.C. In the middle of the concert, Jeremy and I danced the ballroom minuet and two allemandes (later style), for which I had held meetings with the orchestra staff. As the 2000-seated hall created an amazing sound led by the excellent musicians and conductor, we enjoyed a simply wonderful time!

In the following week, we had four concerts in three different venues. We prepared for the concerts with the musicians in just about two months! I made new costumes as usual. Preparing music with the musicians was an enjoyable time as we came across some nice pieces while choosing what to put between dances and every day I also had new ideas about possible stage effects. One of the instrumental groups was a trio of violin, viol and harpsichord, whilst the other was a duo of harpsichord and recorder. The two groups created different arrangements of the dance tunes for themselves, and so I had double rehearsals as well as having to prepare two types of flyers, posters and programmes. We chose to insert tunes by French composers of the second half of the 18th-century composers, with music by Mozart at the end of the concert. (The trio played a piece by Marais to open the concert, as this year is the 350th anniversary of Marais's birth. The title of our concert was '*The dance and music; a hundred years in France*'!) The musicians, who are actually my dance students, were excellent, and I enjoyed the difference between two groups in their arrangements, sound, repertoire and performance, etc.

Itami: An old Sake Cellar on a hot and humid day

The hall we used in Itami (near Osaka) was an old Japanese Sake (rice wine) cellar, restored recently for a variety of art performances. The cellar was located at the end of a historical Japanese building. We used typical Japanese tatami-mat rooms as our changing rooms. The floor of the cellar kept its original style, i.e. beaten earth, whilst the walls were mixed with dried grass. The ceiling was very high. People said the sound was expected to be very good there, but the day we had the concert was very humid and hot, and the soil, I think, must have taken in the humidity, which gave less reverberation. The slightly damp soil floor was too sticky for us to do slides and turns comfortably. Unlike most public places, the hall was not air-conditioned – for technical and authenticity reasons. Luckily, however, the audience, some of who came from a long distance by bullet train, concentrated on the concert and seemed to enjoy it.

Okayama

In Okayama, we used a medium-sized modern hall, where CDDB (Philippa Waite, Jeremy, Matt Lewis and I) had its first concert in Japan in 2004. The floor was wonderful, and the sound was good. Lots of lovely staff (all pupils of mine) worked hard, and it seemed that they and the audience enjoyed the show as much as we the performers did.

Kobe

The hall in Kobe was formerly a private mansion which now belongs to the national government. The chairman of the committee for restoring the building came to videotape our concert to put it on their website. The mansion, especially the hall, was designed with beautifully exquisite ornaments: on the walls, stairs and balcony, stained glasses, fireplace, chandelier, mosaic floor, etc. They were in a mixture of western styles but predominately Art Deco. The decorative design of the hall, the sophisticated stairs and balcony, and a beautiful glass door inspired me for some stage effects. The harpsichord and recorder sounded gorgeous in the cube-shaped wood walled room, and I believe our dances looked better being surrounded by such beautiful ornaments. We did two concerts there with just 15 minutes break inbetween (as the first planned concert sold out quickly)! The audience had to walk up to the place from the foot of the hill in the rain. On the way back to Okayama, there were six people in my car driven by my sister, including some helpers and a pile of costumes reaching the roof. It really felt like a theatrical troupe wagon. We were all happy in the car after the last excellent concert.

Jeremy came a long way, helped me and worked very hard through the week of rehearsals beforehand, the performances, and an interview and demonstration on TV with me. The concert audience enjoyed his 'pirate' dance, for which I did a captain dance to balance it. These were, with another dance, a kind of commedia section among noble style dances. People told me how much they enjoyed the concerts; dances, music, Jeremy's song, costumes, etc. Some really enthusiastic people came to the two concerts at the different venues, while those who had missed the concerts were frustrated with the good reports they had heard. The musicians learned more about playing dance music and were very good to work with. The audience and dance students got some of the essence of baroque dance in the couple dances. All in all, it was absolutely a wonderful and energetic two-week concert tour.

And about a week later, I was in the UK at the Leicester Festival with Diana Cruickshank's Rostibolli!

Nobuko Yuasa and Jeremy Badcock

