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Book Review: From Mozart to Messiaen: Reflections on a Lifetime of Music

Steven Young

Bridgewater State University, s1young@bridgew.edu

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From Mozart to Messiaen: Reflections on a Lifetime of Music

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Haruki Murakami, *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

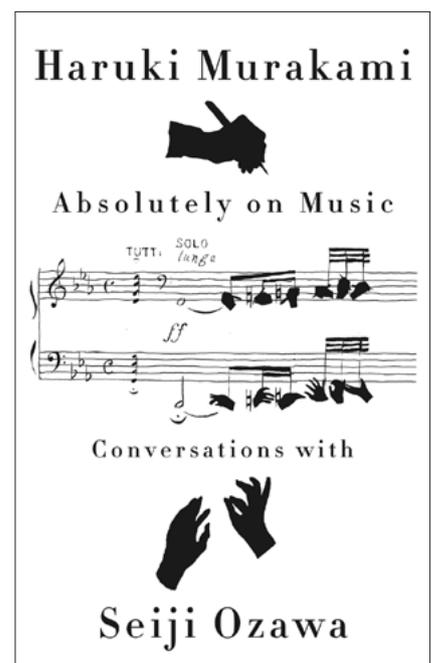
Japanese author Haruki Murakami may be best known as a writer of fiction, but his latest book departs from that focus to offer a series of real-life conversations about the world of classical music. Murakami sat with maestro Seiji Ozawa, former music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1973–2002), on six occasions over a two-year period to talk with him about his career and about music. The initial connection was made through Ozawa's daughter, Seira, a writer, who knew Murakami's wife. After Murakami observed the Seiji Ozawa Music Academy in Kyoto, a project dear to Ozawa, the two began this series of conversations, giving Ozawa the opportunity to reminisce about music with a true music devotee. (In addition to possessing a large record collection and frequenting concert performances, Murakami has an extensive understanding of classical music and jazz, especially for a self-professed non-musician.) Ozawa, one of the world's busiest conductors, underwent surgery in 2010 for esophageal cancer at the age of 75, and the recuperation period required him to severely cut back his professional engagements, giving him ample time to talk with Murakami.

The conversations explore the multifaceted career of one of the first Asian musicians to break into the Western classical music arena. His tutelage under such great conductors as Herbert von Karajan (1908–89) and Leonard Bernstein (1918–90) prepared Ozawa for his conductorships in Toronto, San

Francisco, and Boston, as well as with the Vienna State Opera. Ozawa credits much of his success then and now to his first Japanese mentor, Hideo Saito (1902–74), in whose memory Ozawa founded a new orchestra in Japan, the Saito Kinen [Memorial] Orchestra, which he continues to lead.

Since the conversations are transcribed verbatim, apparently with only the slightest editorial touch, the material is scattered, often shifting focus abruptly and returning to previous topics. Ozawa is very careful not to say anything untoward about his colleagues; he treats every musician in the book with great respect. Murakami's knowledge of the classical music world is considerable, facilitating detailed and wide-ranging discussions on repertoire, technique, and history. However, Murakami cannot avoid using his literary skills as he describes what he hears. When he writes about a Rudolph Serkin performance of the "Emperor" Concerto by Beethoven, Ozawa is made to say: "I am particularly fond of Serkin's approach to this cadenza. It is like he's climbing a hill with a load on his back. There's nothing fluent here; it's almost as though he's stuttering." Such colorful descriptions are likely to succeed in engaging the less-knowledgeable reader, but they do not capture the tone of real professional musicians.

The discussion about Gustav Mahler's music is especially intriguing because the German conductors with whom Ozawa studied avoided this music. The Nazi regime suppressed the music of



Mahler (1860–1911), a Bohemia-born Jew, so von Karajan and Karl Böhm avoided public performances of those symphonies. Mahler’s reputation suffered from the limited performances of his music; neither conversant mentioned that Mahler later converted to Christianity in order to get some of the recognition he deserved. It was not until Bernstein began to perform these works that Ozawa got to know them. Ozawa insists that Mahler’s music is not as inscrutable as it sounds, pointing out that its apparent complexity derives from the simultaneous layering of relatively simple materials.

and recordings had not allowed him to set aside time for deliberate listening to his own recordings, and only during these conversations did the maestro realize how he had changed as a conductor over his many years. He muses: “Even at my age, you change. And practical experience keeps you changing. This may be the one distinguishing feature of the conductor’s profession. The work itself changes you” (226).

What intrigues me most are Ozawa’s reflections on the art of teaching. He never considered teaching as a career, in part because his English was not very good. (He laments on many occasions

teaching stint to be burdensome due to the demands of his conducting schedule. But the death of his mentor Saito inspired him to take on the responsibility of training future generations of musicians, by creating the Seiji Ozawa International Academy Switzerland, an intensive ten-day summer program for string players. Here, Ozawa and the top-notch faculty train the best of Europe’s young string players in the art of playing chamber music, a skill that is rarely taught in conservatories, where the focus is on training solo performers.

Murakami makes it clear that his intention was to share with musical amateurs the joy of his “afternoons with Ozawa.” Despite minor flaws in Ozawa’s memory and the flowery quality of some of Harukami’s descriptions, one learns a great deal not only about Ozawa and his career, but also about the art of listening and the professional challenges and rewards for the conductor—the musician whose instrument is the entire orchestra.

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Many of the conversations involve recordings that Ozawa made. He reveals that he was often disappointed in his own performances, frequently wishing that he had taken more risks with the music. Concerning the BSO’s recording of Mahler’s First Symphony, “Titan,” Ozawa notes that the orchestra’s sound is “mild” and that “it could use a little more flavor” (214). His usual schedule of rehearsals, performances,

that he wished he had learned English better, as it would have helped him while he was Bernstein’s assistant.) But he does discuss how he trained orchestras to create the sound he desired, usually by asking the string players to change their approach to bowing, asking for them to “dig into the strings” more. After some years in Boston, Ozawa was convinced to do some teaching as part of the Tanglewood Summer Institute. He found this



Steven Young is Professor in the Department of Music.

FEEDBACK

I understand that colleges and universities seem to feel a need to, in some way, show sympathy to the Black Lives Matter movement. I also understand that the US criminal justice system may not always favor blacks, Hispanics or poor white people. That being said, I do object to the one-sided views presented in your publication regarding this matter. There does not seem to be a lot of campus outrage or sympathy for police officers that have been recently killed in ambushes. There is also no mention of how movements that seem to favor one group over another are just another form of racism and only serve to divide rather than unite.

I hope that no taxpayer funds or alumni contributions go toward your publication or for the events advertised therein. If so, please tell me how much so I can adjust my contributions to the school accordingly.

Robert Cote '76
November 29, 2016

Bridgewater Review encourages feedback and welcomes all comments from its readers.