

Touring Japan with Florestan, October 2000

Japanese English, with its mysterious word combinations, is a joy throughout our visit. On the first day, Richard sees a sign at the airport café: 'Live Coffee'. Its paper cups bear the slogan, 'The Art of Hot'. My hairdryer in the hotel has two settings: 'Normal' and 'Healthy'. Our first restaurant offers 'Shell Ligament in Batter'.

Because I haven't much been looking forward to this tour, I haven't given much thought to being in Japan, and so the sight of Tokyo is like a pot of shocking pink paint flung on to the white canvas of my mind.

Day One

I have been booked a practice studio at the Yamaha shop in Tokyo's Shinjuku area, where many of the skyscrapers, flashing neon signs, nightclubs and electrical goods shops are located, along with what appears to be the most fashionable crowd of young people in the world. My practice room is a very Japanese affair: a cubicle lodged in a corridor, with windows in it so that every passer-by can stare at me in my goldfish bowl, which has just enough room for a grand piano and space to walk around it. The noises from the kitchen shop below are clearly audible, so I assume that my playing is the same for them.

I'm practising Schumann trios slowly, with big finger movements and good articulation. This is partly because the long flight on the day before has left me with the usual feeling of swollen joints. Trying out a new fingering for a complex melodic line, I suddenly 'see' my hand folding in on itself like a piece of origami. Why this image should occur to me at that moment I don't know, except that I'm in Japan. I look down at my right hand, folding and unfolding, wondering what shape it might unfold to reveal . . . a swan? . . . a flower? . . . *a hand?*

Later on, I practise Schumann's *Kreisleriana*. Interestingly, this piece, which I first learned in detail when I was a student, still suggests new phrasings and timings to me. I wonder if this means that it is an inexhaustible store of material, or that it's inherently unstable, always changing its centres of gravity? Today I suddenly see how a certain series of modulating phrases, in the Intermezzo of no. 2, just after the first double bar, cannot be properly heard (or understood) unless each 'cadence' is clearly delineated, with a fraction of time after each to let it register. Again, I don't know why I was conscious of the danger that it was incomprehensible, except that I was in a foreign country, where one thinks along these lines automatically.

After hearing some inner parts better than before, and finding new 'voicings' to bring them out, I feel that I've achieved something, and go off to a side-street to eat noodle soup and vegetables (which can only be achieved by beckoning the cook out

into the street, and pointing at the 'mock-up' models of soup bowls displayed in the window). The cooks are amused by my request for a spoon, and in fact I find it easier in the end to use chopsticks, though my poor technique clearly intrigues them.

In the evening the trio goes to rehearse in the 'Music Joy' building. Again, we are shown into a small 'soundproofed' studio into which the sounds of a jazz band are blasting from next door. As often happens – or happens to us – on these occasions, which are supposed to be more or less perfunctory rehearsals of pieces we know extremely well, we suddenly start going into details of phrasing, vibrato, tuning, dynamics, tempo, bowings, and 'elan'. This has often intrigued me – not so much what is said, as the timing of our saying it. It's like a respectful admission of the seriousness of the task before us – making an impression on a new foreign audience. We don't want them to feel that there is anything routine in our playing. Curiously, I have the impression that all three of us are privately a tiny bit bored with this detailed spring-cleaning, yet tacitly we all accept that there's a good psychological reason behind it.

After the rehearsal it's already 10 p.m., but because of jetlag, we're confused about eating times anyway. We explore a tiny area of narrow lanes (Shomben Yokochō) packed with minuscule restaurants, each seating no more than half a dozen people at a counter, with the cooks working a few feet away. This is a welcome change from the neon-lit brashness of Shinjuku proper. Taking our cue from the packed clientele, we wait for seats at a Taiwanese establishment which serves delicious fried dumplings, bean sprouts with liver and green cabbage, etc. Eating tasty noodles and drinking Kirin beer is a strange accompaniment to our conversation about how parental behaviour has affected us – and how we either pass it on to our children, or try to counteract it. The writings of the psychologist Alice Miller have scared us all at various times.

On the way home, walking among the hordes of ultra-cool Japanese with their mobile phones, spiky hennaed hair, snappy suits and sunglasses, Schumann seems very . . . remote? irrelevant? Yet when I say so to Anthony, he tells me that a friend had specifically mentioned that the Japanese used constantly to play Schumann on their classical radio programmes. 'An Artist of the Floating World', indeed.

Day Two

Signs seen in Japanese shops:

'Freshness Burger'

'Rice Dog'

'Be in Creation'

A chocolate bar is called 'Crunky', a powdered milk 'Creap', a drink 'Pokari Sweat'.

Our first concert is in a new and impressive 500-seat concert hall in Musashino, a suburb of Tokyo. This is the first time we've played all three Schumann trios in one programme. Surprisingly, the Japanese audience follows in total silence. Are they gripped, or are they just well-behaved? At the end of the first half we realise that they are gripped. Several people behave in an un-Japanese way, clapping with their hands above their heads, shouting 'Bravo' – and this is only the interval! It's good to play pieces we know so well. There is no distracting mental effort of the wrong kind. We

don't have to expend energy on 'getting inside' the music, or remembering previous instructions once we get there. Instead, I think we all feel free to be struck by new ideas, safe in the knowledge that the others will be open to them, not preoccupied with surface thoughts.

Day Three

Seen on a huge billboard: 'Basic and New!'

On a toolbox, the label 'Tool and Hard'.

Sign on grocery store: 'Lifegoods'.

On sports store: 'Encyclopedia of Life Entertainment'.

I have now worked out how to say in Japanese to my page-turners, 'It was very good – thank you.' For some reason this makes them burst into giggles. I'm reminded that on our last visit (with Domus, in 1993) I thought that Japanese page-turners are possibly the best in the world: alert, quick, quiet, polite, smiling, unobtrusive. Also, they dress beautifully, and observe closely during the concert. In fact, I have often wondered whether the page-turners (mostly pianists themselves) go home and write my fingering in to their scores!

After saying that we know the Schumann programme very well, I have to eat my words at the Osaka concert, or at least in the rehearsal, where, in perverse reaction to yesterday's feeling of security and stability, everybody starts complaining about things they didn't like yesterday. Tempi have got lazy, some are too fast for no good reason; requests are made for others to stop doing little characteristic things which have suddenly become annoying, like playing 'descant' phrases with exaggerated rhythmic freedom, or too loudly, or without due regard to someone else's overlapping phrase. Suddenly I'm sitting there thinking, 'I can't believe it was only this morning that I wrote about how secure this programme feels!'

I wonder about the psychological mechanism that makes us do this. Instead of building on our strengths, we seem to yearn for insecurities – as if it's only through these 'holes in the fabric' that new ideas will emerge. And in a way I suppose it is after all a mark of security that we can dare to stay these destabilising things right before an important concert, and profit from the experience.

In fact we do: the needling of one another in rehearsal results in new things being tried and new things being felt in the concert, with happy results – though even as I'm thinking so, I simultaneously wonder whether an outsider would notice any difference from last night's concert. Is it a bit like the story of the princess and the pea – oversensitivity to some minuscule change?

After the Osaka concert, we're asked to do a CD signing in the foyer. A long queue of about 50 people awaits us. We sign CDs, sleeve notes, programmes, pieces of music, gold-framed cards, and even postcards which one fan has made from xeroxed photos of us stuck onto card (and presumably prepared before the concert). In the middle of signing, I glance up and see my page-turner humbly waiting in line with her programme, along with everyone else. How typically Japanese that she didn't take the chance to ask me for this backstage!

In the sushi bar afterwards, I ask Mr N. (our guide) how to compliment a page-turner in Japanese. He replies that 'one does not say such things to such a person'. 'Thank you' would be the most that is required, it seems. This is a rather

shocking cultural insight. It leads to more questioning and lots of embarrassed laughter from him. Eventually I ask him how one would compliment an artist on a fine performance. He replies in Japanese, and then says, 'I translate straightly: You had a hard work.' To me this is not, or would not be, either a compliment or a comment on the artistry. Clearly Japanese social customs are hard to learn. We find the audience's applause puzzling too. They seem to clap using just the tips of their fingers, and this makes frail and uncommitted sound, compared to Western audiences who use muscles and whole arm movements when they clap enthusiastically. At the end of the concert the applause sounds merely polite, yet it goes on for ages, and after many curtain calls we realise that they have really liked us. After an encore, they clap on and on (still sounding somewhat timid to Western ears) and can only be stopped in the end by a decisive single bow followed by a swift exit.

Thinking about this afterwards, I reflect that clapping is in fact a strange convention. I wonder how people first hit on this method of showing their appreciation? I used to think that its main advantage was that it is a universal form of expression, crossing all language barriers, but the Japanese experience shows that it does have regional variations, and that one can't gauge the warmth of the response from the sound of the clapping. In this regard I remember talking to a friend who had given a concert at a New Age community in Scotland where the audience, instead of clapping, waved their hands silently in the air 'to avoid disturbing the beautiful vibrations left in the room by the music'. This is a lovely idea, though in the event my friend told me it was disconcertingly silent for the players as they bowed and left the stage. Perhaps bowing and leaving the stage is the wrong action in such circumstances.

During the CD signing we realise how enthusiastic they really were: people grasp our hands and say, 'You touched my heart', 'You moved me', and 'Your wonderful performance was like an intimate talk.' In view of Mr N's comments earlier, these must be great compliments. Surely they would not say such things just to be polite – or would they?

Ant tells me that he and Richard went back to the lane of yakitori cafés in Tokyo late the other night after our concert. The clientele was noticeably rougher, and they had the feeling that they were amongst gangsters. Suddenly, one of the gangsters got up to leave, and in the press of people his jacket was pulled backwards off his shoulders, revealing a T-shirt with the words 'Prunella Scales' on it. This is especially funny because Prunella Scales and her family are friends and supporters of our trio. I tell Ant I don't believe his story, and quiz him thoroughly as to whether it is really true. Eventually he says, 'Well, to be honest, what I actually saw was, 'runella Scales.' For some reason this is even more convincing than his first version.