

The Asia Pacific Times

A monthly newspaper from Germany

Where Bach was jailed, Asians pay homage

January 2008 Life

Weimar gets ready for the tercentenary of the composer's arrival – thousands of Japanese expected – By Uwe Siemon-Netto

This year, thousands of Japanese and Koreans will be among the visitors pouring into the central German town of Weimar where Johann Sebastian Bach took up residence exactly three centuries ago, composed most of his organ works and was jailed by the local ruler after seeking greener pastures elsewhere. Bach's popularity in Asia has become an enduring phenomenon, particularly because of its missionary attributes.

When Yuko Maruyama launches into her organ prelude Sunday mornings at the beginning of divine service in a Minneapolis church, chances are she will be playing something Johann Sebastian Bach wrote three centuries ago during the period he was the court composer to Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Saxony-Weimar.

There are two reasons for this probability. First, like an ever-growing number of Japanese, Maruyama is passionate about Bach – she attributes her conversion from Buddhism to Christianity to his music. “When I play a fugue, I can hear Bach talking to God,” she told Metro Lutheran, a monthly church paper in the Twin Cities.

Second, Bach composed three quarters of his organ works in the enchanting Thuringian town of Weimar, which captivated him in a strange sort of way at the end of his nine-year tenure there from 1708 until 1717. When he accepted a more lucrative position in nearby Köthen, Weimar's Duke Wilhelm Ernst sent him to prison for four weeks, reducing him to a daily diet of bread and water. The lock from his cell is still on display at the Bach Museum in Eisenach, the town where the composer was born in 1685.

Still, this year Weimar will benefit from the persistent Bach boom sweeping East Asia. Scores of Japanese journalists have already roamed this town on pre-tercentenary research assignments, according to Uta Kühne, spokeswoman for Weimar GmbH, a company promoting the city's economic development and tourism.

Two major tour operators in Japan and another in South Korea have added Weimar to their destinations. Not only is it the site of his brief incarceration but also the birthplace of two of his

sons, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel, who were also stellar musicians whose compositions are as much admired in Asia as they are in the Western world.

The influx of Asians to Bach sites in Germany has been perplexing musicologists and theologians alike for decades now. They come in droves not only as tourists but also as serious students of music. Of the 850 students at Germany's oldest state conservatory, the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in Leipzig, 148 are Asians, chiefly South Koreans and Japanese, according to Ute Fries, dean of students. Bach was musical director of Leipzig's Thomaskirche for the last 27 years of his life and wrote most of his cantatas there. Leipzig's late "superintendent" (regional bishop) Rev. Johannes Richter used to wonder even back in the days when this city was part of Communist East Germany. "What is it about his work that evidently bridges all cultural divides and has such a massive missionary impact for Christianity in faraway parts of the world?"

For years, Richter observed with growing fascination how in his Gothic sanctuary, Japanese musicologist Keisuke Maruyama studied the influence of the weekday pericopes (prescribed readings) in the early 18th-century Lutheran lectionary cycle on Bach's cantatas. When he had finished, he told the clergyman: "It is not enough to read Christian texts. I want to be a Christian myself. Please baptize me."

But this scholar's conversion could have been attributed to the impact of pericopes' biblical texts on Maruyama. Why, though, would a fugue have such evangelistic powers as it did on the Japanese organist in Minnesota? Why would even listening to Bach's Goldberg Variations, which contain no lyrics, arouse someone's interest in Christianity? This happened when Masashi Yasuda, a former agnostic, heard a CD with Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's rendering of this complex Clavier-Übung, or keyboard study. Still, Yasuda's spiritual journey began precisely with these variations. He is now a Jesuit priest teaching systematic theology at Sophia University in Tokyo.

Some theologians tend to attribute the astounding impact of Bach's music particularly on the scientific minds of many Asians to the Holy Spirit. Canon Arthur Peacocke, a Church of England clergyman and noted biologist who is also one of the leading spokesmen in burgeoning international dialog between theology and the natural sciences, once suggested that the Holy Spirit personally dictated "The Art of the Fugue," Bach's arguably most challenging work, into the composer's plume.

"The reason why Bach's most abstract works guide some Asian people to Christ is because his music reflects the perfect beauty of created order to which the Japanese mind is particularly receptive," suggested Charles Ford, a mathematics professor at the University of St. Louis. "Bach has the same effect on me, a Western scientist," added Ford, who is also one of America's foremost experts on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred Lutheran theologian hanged by the Nazis.

Henry Gerike, organist and choirmaster at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, a Lutheran school of theology, agrees with Ford: "The fugue is the best way God has given us to enjoy his creation. But of course Bach's most significant message to us is the Gospel." Gerike echoes Swedish archbishop Nathan Söder-blom (1866-1931), who famously called Bach's cantatas "the fifth Gospel."

Rev. Robert Bergt, musical director of Concordia's Bach at the Sem concert series, has first-hand experience with the missionary lure of Bach's cantatas in Tokyo. He used to be the chief conductor of Musashino Music Academy's three orchestras in the Japanese capital. Bach's compositions brought his musicians, audiences and students into contact with the Word of God, he said. "Some of these people would then in private declare themselves as 'closet Christians,'" Bergt told Christian History magazine. "I saw this happen at least 15 times. And during one of them I eventually baptized myself." While only one percent of Japan's population of 128 million is officially Christian, Bergt estimated that the real figure could be three times as high if one includes secret believers.

After two failed attempts to popularize Bach's music in Japan since the late 19th century, a veritable Bach boom has been sweeping that country for the past 16 years. Its driving force is organist Masaaki Suzuki, founder and conductor of the Bach Collegium Japan that has spawned hundreds of similar societies throughout the country.

During Advent or Holy Week, respectively, Suzuki's performances of the "Christmas Oratorio" or the "St. Matthew Passion" are always sold out, even though tickets cost more than \$600. After each concert, members of the audience crowd Suzuki on the podium asking him about the Christian concept of hope and about death, a topic normally taboo in polite Japanese society. "I am spreading Bach's message, which is a biblical one," Suzuki said.

But why do Bach's melodies and harmonies, so alien to the Asian ear, appeal to the Japanese? Some musicologists attribute this to Francis Xavier and other Jesuit missionaries, who introduced the Gregorian chant to Japan and built organs from bamboo pipes 400 years ago. Though Christianity was soon squashed, elements of its music infiltrated traditional folk song. Four centuries later, this curious fact is now enabling tens of thousands of people in one of the most secularized nations on earth to turn to Christianity via Bach. But here's the irony: As some of these will come to pay homage to Bach during the Weimar tercentenary celebrations, his own land has become mission territory after 56 years of Nazi and Communist dictatorships. In Thuringia and neighboring Saxony, only one quarter of the population belongs to a Christian church.

– *Uwe Siemon-Netto, a Leipzig-born veteran foreign correspondent, is scholar-in-residence at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (U.S.).*