

First Encounter with the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta

By Peter Grilli

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Tension and excitement were running high as I rushed toward Tokyo Opera City on Thursday evening, August 20, 2015. It was the day that the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta would finally make its long awaited Tokyo debut. I had flown all the way from Boston to Tokyo that same day, and had landed at Narita Airport only two hours earlier. Stopping briefly at a nearby hotel to shower and change, I was now hurrying through the crowded streets of Shinjuku toward the concert hall. It was rumored that the Empress of Japan would honor the orchestra by attending this evening's concert – but she had been ill during previous weeks, and it was not certain that she would be able to attend.



The Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, with Panos Karan piano soloist, Fukushima, 2014.

Savoring the excitement of the moment, many thoughts kept flashing through my mind about this fresh young ensemble of Fukushima teen agers, which had been created by two Greek musicians, pianist Panos Karan and flutist Zach Tarpagos, whose London-based charity Keys of Change had reached out to help the people of Fukushima in the immediate aftermath of the terrible earthquakes, tsunami, and nuclear disaster that had devastated northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011. Through long hours of dedicated practice and rehearsing, the Fukushima students had developed their musical abilities as an orchestra and had brought renewed confidence and communal cohesion to their city. With coaching

and continuous support from the musicians of Keys of Change, they had offered frequent public concerts at home in Fukushima, and had won international acclaim the year before at a concert in London at Queen Elizabeth Hall. In Japan and abroad, the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta had become a symbol of Tohoku's resilience and an emblem of Japan's recovery. Tonight I would be hearing my friends Panos and Zach perform live with this brave young orchestra for the very first time!

The Fukushima kids had worked long and hard preparing for this concert, and their moment in the spotlight had finally arrived. Many of their friends and supporters had also worked hard to raise the funds needed to present this concert, to publicize it and sell tickets, and they – like me -- were now crowding into one of Tokyo's finest concert halls to witness the fruits of their labors. The two young Greek musicians and other European colleagues from Keys of Change had made countless trips to Fukushima over four years and had spent the previous three weeks in the city tirelessly rehearsing with the orchestra. Conductor Tetsuji Honna had flown from Vietnam, where he is Music Director of the Hanoi Symphony Orchestra, and had spent the previous few days in Fukushima leading the FYS through the difficult repertory that its members had selected for their Tokyo debut.



Two young French horn players, rehearsing with the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, Tokyo Opera City, 2015.
(Photo: Fumiko Tanaka)

The crowd of concertgoers flowing toward the hall reassured me. Only month ago, I had heard that a mere handful of tickets had been sold for this concert, and friends of the FYS feared that the earnest young musicians from Fukushima might be greeted by a tiny audience in a near-empty hall. At that point, a group of Tokyo friends and I had swung into action, contacting everyone in our data-bases and social-media networks, and urging everyone we knew to order tickets. Determined not to “paper” the hall with people accepting free tickets, our urgent message to everyone was “You must attend this concert – but we’re not inviting you. Buy your own tickets!” Clearly, many had responded to the call. The crowd streaming toward the hall was large. All the myriad pieces of this massive jigsaw puzzle of an event were finally falling into place!

Entering the lobby of the Concert Hall of Tokyo Opera City, I was immediately greeted by my good friend Hideya Taida, a businessman with a long and distinguished international career and a lifelong passion for classical music. Taida-san had been the FYS' principal ally in organizing this concert and had worked tirelessly to insure that it would go well. When we heard that ticket sales were slow, Taida-san had immediately pulled together a group of volunteer colleagues to assist in publicizing the event. He also had recruited several professional musician friends from the Japan Philharmonic and Toho Conservatory to coach the Fukushima musicians and to join them in rehearsing and performing. Having played the violin since childhood, Taida-san is a fine amateur violinist who occasionally is invited to the Imperial Palace to play chamber music with the Empress, herself a highly skilled pianist. It was Taida-san who informed Her Majesty about the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, and it was thanks to him that she accepted an invitation to attend tonight's concert. He was as thrilled and as gratified as I to see the crowds of people entering the hall.

"Yes, Her Majesty is definitely coming!" Taida-san whispered in my ear, "And you will be seated next to her!" This came as a delightful surprise. I knew that the protocols were complicated, and to be seated next to the Empress was an amazing honor. Since the concert was about to begin, there was little time to discuss the details. In a few whispered moments with Taida-san and representatives of the Imperial Household Agency, I learned that Her Majesty would arrive quietly during the intermission, and that Mr. Taida and I had been appointed to greet her and escort her to her seat at the center of the first balcony. Thankfully, Taida-san, who is far more experienced in such matters than I, would be with me and would be seated next to Her Majesty as well. At that moment, chimes and buzzers were announcing the start of the concert so there was no time to fret or worry about the proprieties of greeting an empress. I simply rushed upstairs to the first balcony, waving at friends greeting me as they hurried to their seats.



Her Majesty Empress Michiko attending the concert by the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, flanked by Hideya Taida and Peter Grilli; Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall, August 20, 2015. (Photo: Kyodo News)

I had no time to wonder how well the young orchestra would perform, or worry that they might disappoint their imperial guest. I barely even had time to look the orchestra of Fukushima teenagers whom I knew only from photographs and videos. As soon as I sank into my seat, conductor Tetsuji Honna strode forcefully across the stage, leaped onto the podium and summoned the orchestra to attention. Launching energetically into the opening chords of Glinka's Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila*, the orchestra proclaimed confidence and vigor. It is the perfect piece for an unknown orchestra to open its program. The music is triumphant, loud and positive. There is no room for hesitation in those opening measures, and the Fukushima players played them brilliantly, signaling instantly that they were up to virtually any musical challenge. I sank back into my seat, relieved, thrilled, and totally delighted in the knowledge that this was going to be an evening of wonderful music-making!



Musicians from the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, with pianist Panos Karan and flute soloist Zach Tarpagos, backstage at Tokyo Opera City, August 20, 2015. (Photo: Peter Grilli)

The rest of the program flowed seamlessly, and beautifully. Flutist Zach Tarpagos, one of the original musicians who had helped establish the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta, performed Mozart's Flute Concerto in D Major (K 314), and followed that piece with the spirited final movement of Bach's Suite No. 2 in B minor (BWV 1067). Zach conducted and performed the flute solos in both pieces, and the well trained FYS string players followed his lead flawlessly. It was clear that the orchestra members were devoted to this European virtuoso who had made repeated trips to Fukushima to coach and encourage them.

The first half of the program concluded with the solemn and haunting *Valse Triste* by Jan Sibelius, performed with beautifully spun out sound by the young instrumentalists. They were conducted in this section by the Indian violinist and music teacher Sanjib Modal, who had traveled from Kolkata to join this concert. A hallmark of the mission of Keys of Change, the British charity that had helped establish the FYS and had mentored it ever since, is to conduct music projects in areas of severe poverty or social distress. Sanjib Modal had established a music school in the poorest slums of Kolkata, and had collaborated with Keys of Change on several projects there. Now he was visiting Japan to work with the young musicians of Fukushima.

When Empress Michiko entered the concert hall at the end of the intermission, the entire audience of nearly 2000 people rose to greet and applaud her. It is customary for such applause to greet the entrance of a member of the Japanese imperial family, but this evening it was exceptionally long and enthusiastic. Her Majesty had recently been ill and this was her first public appearance since her recovery. She modestly acknowledged the audience's applause at first, but when it continued for five or six minutes, she began to wave and smile in obvious appreciation of the audience's warm greeting. As we settled into our seats, she asked me about the origins of the orchestra and its relationship to Panos Karan and Zach Tarpagos, the Greek musicians who had helped create it after the troubles of 2011. She herself had visited the devastated areas of Tohoku many times in recent years, constantly striving to console and encourage the victims there. As a pianist herself, the Empress fully appreciated the healing powers of music, and expressed personal gratitude for the efforts of foreign musicians to help the people of Tohoku. She was looking forward, she said, to going backstage after the concert to speak with the young Fukushima musicians and their mentors from abroad.

Soon Panos Karan strode onstage with conductor Honna to perform the Piano Concerto No. 2 by Rachmaninoff. By now, his reputation for helping the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta had spread through the audience, which welcomed him with extended applause. The audience listened to Panos' powerful performance of this challenging concerto with rapt attention. I could feel the intensity of Her Majesty's concentration as she listened to this music that she knew well. As the slow lyricism of the concerto's gorgeous second movement unfolded, with the duo solos of flute and piano, I noticed her slowly take a handkerchief from her purse and quietly dab her eyes. I too began to choke up, deeply moved by the beauty of Panos' piano accompanied by the fine flute playing of a young girl in the orchestra, and also by the Empress' response. I will never forget that moment of sheer musical beauty and profound emotion.

At the concert's end, the audience erupted into rapturous applause, and with a continuing ovation summoned the orchestra and soloists back onstage for one encore after another. There were tears of joy onstage and throughout the hall. I wondered what the musicians who had already suffered so much in their young lives were feeling as they gazed out into the cheering audience. They had survived and now there could be no doubt that – through music -- they had prevailed! Rejoicing in their triumph at that moment, I resolved inwardly to do everything I could to help introduce the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta to the world.



Standing ovation for the Fukushima Youth Sinfonietta at Tokyo Opera City, August 20, 2015
(Photo: Ryusei Kojima)