

BOOK REVIEW

*Not by Love Alone:
The Violin in Japan, 1850–2010*

Margaret Mehl

Sound Book Press, 2014
548 pages.



The author of this meticulously researched book is a veteran historian of Meiji Japan, and an accomplished violinist herself. She has written an encyclopedic compendium of all aspects of the violin, violinists, and violin music in Japan, and at the same time provided a coherent narrative in an engaging style of writing.

Starting from the present global prominence of Japanese violinists and the remarkable influence of the Suzuki method for violin pedagogy, she documents the process whereby these phenomena came about, from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Most of the book is about the introduction of Western music to Japan, centering on the violin. As a historian she skillfully positions the musical narrative into the broader social narrative, with excellent overview passages at strategic points.

She insists that “Western classical music is only ‘Western’ in the sense that it originated in the West, in Europe, but it has long ceased to belong to Europeans... . Western classical music played in Japan sounds much the same as it does in the West, but ... it is nevertheless just as much ‘Japanese’ as it is ‘Western’; so completely have the Japanese made it their own, even while keeping it on a pedestal and holding on to the belief that it is only at home in its European heartlands” (p. 6).

While the story of the role of music in the modernization of Japan has been told before, Mehl’s emphasis on individuals is fresh. She introduces the two pioneering violinist sisters, Kōda Nobu (1870–1946) and Andō Kō (1878–1963), detailing their talent, study abroad, and Nobu’s role as a composer as well as teacher and performer. Against a broad canvas of general developments is limned a studded cast of individuals (some well-known, such as Yamada Kōsaku [1886–1965]), and extensive vignettes of many others now virtually forgotten even in Japan. There is plenty of colorful detail about personalities and foibles, as well as historical gossip.

The early twentieth century violin boom was facilitated by the availability of Japanese-made violins, the publication of dozens of violin tutors, and the active combination of hybrid Japanese music performed on both Japanese instruments and the violin.

After the First World War, Mehl argues that the take-up of western music in Japan had created sufficient interest and expertise that Japan emerged as a “musical power,” attracting visiting superstars (such as Heifetz, Kreisler, and Zimbalist) and European refugee musicians (such as Mogilevsky), many of whom stayed long term. The excellent section on the era of the growth of symphony orchestras gives space to the Kansai region, counterbalancing the common bias towards Tokyo.

The era saw the emergence of two prominent teachers of the violin: the creator of the “Suzuki method,” Suzuki Shin’ichi (1898–1998), the son of pioneer violin maker, Suzuki Masakichi; and Sumi Saburō (1902–1984). They taught the children who became prominent after the war. Homegrown child prodigies included Suwa Nejiko (1920–2012), who had learned from the age of three. Because after 1937 no foreign celebrity musicians toured, and eventually most resident foreigners were not allowed to perform, there were increased opportunities for local talent. The child prodigies nurtured in the 1930s and 1940s filled the gap until well after the end of the war.

The first part ends with an account of Japanese musicians who spent the war years in Germany, with most space devoted to Konoe Hidemaro and Suwa Nejiko. The narrative of their flight from Berlin to Austria with Japanese embassy staff in 1945, their rescue by American forces, their transfer to America, and their return to Japan by the end of 1945 is a striking way of ending the first part of the book.

The second part begins with a masterly overview of postwar occupied Japan and the return of musical life. The violin, an elite instrument in the prewar period, now experienced a second boom. Yamaha and Kawai music schools flourished and the Suzuki method grew first in Japan and then internationally. Study abroad became the norm rather than the exception. Japanese violinists of the postwar period had learned to play from early childhood, unlike most of the earlier generations. The narrative is enlivened by a stunning number of fully developed portraits. Contrasting cases of the highly successful Etō Toshiya (1927–2008) and the tragic case of the equally talented Watanabe Shigeo (1941–1999) highlight the challenges faced by Japanese violinists. There is an extensive section on international star Gotō Midori (1971–) and her half-brother Ryū. Another section reveals the “Kanda scandal” and corruption surrounding the purchase of instruments with fake certificates in 1982.

The final part includes a chapter on “violin mums.” Introducing the books written by Midori’s mother, and by the mother of Senju Mariko (1952–), Mehl critiques the hard work, sacrifice, and the unhealthy aspects of raising a violin genius. Further chapters discuss the problems of the Japanese violin manufacturing industry, chamber music, amateur performers, and a new market for the aging population. Again, plenty of individuals are profiled, and all make for fascinating reading.

Mehl concludes by asking again: What is Japanese music anyway? Film music and popular music unselfconsciously use Western musical idioms that are undeniably also Japanese. In both these genres, “the violin has most obviously become part of a modern Japanese tradition” (p. 405). At the same time, the violin is “part of the story of the Japanese increasingly taking part in global musical culture” (p. 405). So the distinction between classical and popular, and between Japanese and foreign, loses its meaning.

This is a valuable addition to the growing literature about Western music in Japan. A similar story could be told about the piano in Japan, or the flute, the organ, opera, the orchestra, and indeed such books exist in Japanese. Mehl provides a challenging model for such studies, setting a high standard of research and exhaustive coverage, and the ability to tell an interesting story.

Reviewed by Alison Tokita