

## LETTER from Kanji (山野内勘二)

Hello. On September 13th, the eagerly awaited 2023-2024 season of the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO) began. The program, focusing on Johannes Brahms, Robert Schumann, and Clara Schumann, is fantastic.

Actually, in May of this year, I wrote an essay in Japanese about the NACO for a music column called "Paradise of Music~The Other Side of Canada."

Here is a provisional English translation for you all. I hope you enjoy reading this.

音楽の楽園 Paradise of Music~The other side of Canada

May 15, 2023

(provisional translation)

Hello everyone. With the arrival of May's voice, it seems like late spring has come to Ottawa, but in the blink of an eye, we find ourselves in early summer. The Tulip Festival has also begun, and the city is overflowing with vibrant colors. It's the perfect season for a stroll along the Rideau Canal, where you can truly appreciate the beauty of Ottawa, the capital blessed by nature. Of course, Ottawa has many wonderful aspects besides its beautiful nature. One of them is the National Arts Centre Orchestra, affectionately known as "NACO" locally, which enriches Ottawa's musical life.

### HISTORY

While the NAC Orchestra is a world-class orchestra, there may be people who are not that familiar with NACO in Japan. Let's briefly trace its history.

First, Ottawa. It's the capital of Canada, but Canada's largest cities are Toronto (now the third-largest city in North America after New York and Los Angeles),

Vancouver, Montreal, and Calgary, with Ottawa being the fifth largest, with a population of about one million.

Canada itself is a very young nation, and Queen Victoria chose Ottawa as its capital during the colonial era of the British Empire in 1857. At the time, it was a small village serving as a hub for the timber trade. It was chosen due to its advantageous location across the river from Quebec and its distance from the U.S. border. On July 1, 1867, Canada was founded as a self-governing dominion within the British Empire, and with the 1931 Westminster Charter, it became a sovereign nation in both in name and reality. Since then, Ottawa has developed alongside Canada's growth. However, Ottawa's essence remained as a political city, and it took time to develop economically and culturally.

A turning point came with Canada's centennial celebrations. Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson decided to establish the National Arts Centre in Ottawa for the centennial in 1967, a decision made in 1964. The site was along the Rideau Canal in the heart of Ottawa, near Parliament Hill. The design was by Fred Lebensold, one of the founding members of the Montreal-based architectural firm AFOP and a professor of architecture at McGill University. He immigrated to Canada from Poland at the age of 32, which is quite characteristic of Canada. Construction began in 1964, but unfortunately, it wasn't completed in time for the centennial and opened on June 2, 1969. However, the wait was worth it. The Centre featured a very modern glass complex with a large theater for performing arts, rehearsal halls, reception halls, workshop spaces, shops, and restaurants, becoming a landmark in the capital.

At the same time, the NAC's centerpiece, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, was established as the resident orchestra. A young orchestra was born in the young nation's young capital. The first music director was Jean-Marie Beaudet, a musician from Quebec's Setford Mines, who had previously led the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and was a celebrated Canadian musician.

## **LEAP**

In any country and any city, the local orchestra is a source of pride, and NACO is no exception. It has received support not only from the local community but

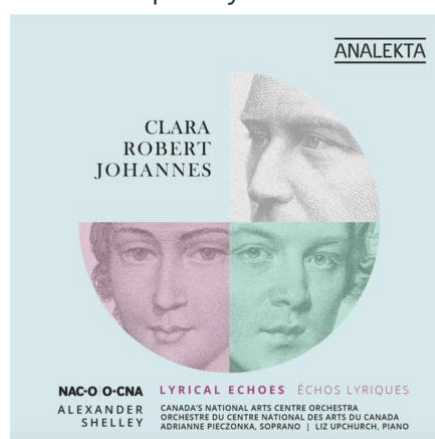
also from the federal government, which has helped it grow in strength. In particular, in 1991, with the internationally renowned Trevor Pinnock leading performances on period instruments, NACO transitioned from being "Ottawa's Orchestra" to "Canada's Orchestra," elevating its reputation.

Then, in 1999, the world-renowned violinist and conductor Pinchas Zukerman assumed the role of music director. Over his 16-year tenure, he honed NACO's



skills, actively engaged in recording, and propelled the orchestra onto the global stage as one of the finest.

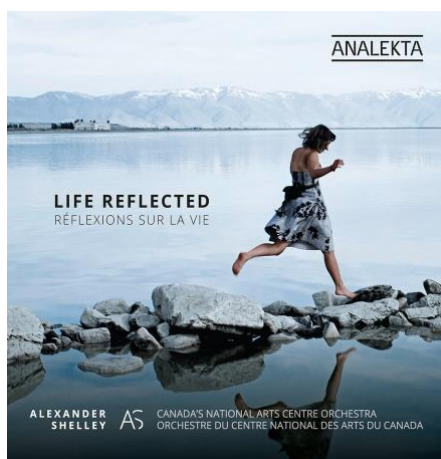
In 2015, Alexander Shelley succeeded Zukerman as the seventh music director. Born in London in 1979 to pianist parents, he excelled in cello and conducting at the Royal Academy of Music. His appointment at the age of 36 was a testament to his exceptional talent. Shelley is highly creative and never rests in delivering performances of classical masterpieces. Shortly after taking office, he initiated the "Life Reflected" project, which portrays the lives of four Canadian women through music. These women represent contemporary Canada: Nobel laureate



Alice Munro, Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe, astronaut Roberta Bondar, and Amanda Todd, who tragically took her own life at 15 due to online abuse. Four young Canadian composers contributed individual compositions, and the multimedia performances reflect the arrival of a new era. Furthermore, his 2020 release, "Clara-Robert-Johannes: Longing for Love," condensed the music and lives of three geniuses—Schumann, his wife Clara, and Brahms—into a hidden gem of a double CD set, interconnected through the improvisations of Gabriela Montero. These albums showcase Shelley's forward-thinking approach.

## APPLAUSE

And so, NACO celebrates its 54th year of existence this year. As a resident of Ottawa, I have found opportunities to attend performances at the National Arts



Centre. Let me share my impressions of three remarkable performances in 2023.

### *"Songs for Murdered Sisters" - World Premiere of Margaret Atwood's Work*

On February 9th, the world premiere of "Songs for Murdered Sisters for baritone and orchestra," a composition by the contemporary opera composer Jake Heggie, based on poems by the national author Margaret Atwood, was performed. This work was commissioned jointly by NAC Orchestra and the Houston Grand Opera.

"Songs for Murdered Sisters" draws its inspiration from poems released by Ms. Atwood in 2020, which poignantly depict a series of domestic violence murders that occurred in Canada in 2015. It delves into the anger, consolation, and relief

surrounding these senseless murders and asks whether there is an answer. Heggie's melodies and orchestration vividly capture the human emotions facing such heinous acts, evoking a noble sense of humanity transcending anger and revenge.

Margaret Atwood, currently residing in Toronto and 83 years old, made a special visit to Ottawa for this world premiere. Her greeting from the stage after the performance left a lasting impression.

The baritone, Joshua Hopkins, who completed his master's degree in music at McGill University, delivered a heartfelt performance. He is a remarkable talent who won the Julian Gayarre Singing Competition after being awarded the competition's top prize by José Carreras in September 2002. Notably, Joshua's sister was one of the victims, adding a deeply personal connection to the performance. His meticulous singing of Ms. Atwood's carefully crafted words, coupled with his powerful voice, deeply touched the audience. It was a moving tribute that transcended words.

#### *Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 C Minor Op.67 "Fate"*

April 23rd was all about "Fate." This special performance took place during the official visit of Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the President of Germany, to Canada, hosted at the National Arts Centre. I was fortunate to attend this event, thanks to an invitation from Sabine Sparwasser, the German Ambassador to Canada, who is my G7 colleague.

The musicians of NACO are all engaged in various activities individually. In particular, Music Director Alexander Shelley, as previously mentioned, has a hectic schedule conducting multiple orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London, with commitments booked two years in advance. Therefore, the alignment of President Steinmeier's Ottawa visit and NAC Orchestra's schedule was quite miraculous.

With President Steinmeier, a representative of Beethoven's homeland, in attendance, NACO gave an electrifying performance. The tension in the hall was

palpable from the dramatic opening notes of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor. As the piece unfolded, it gradually shifted towards a sense of hope. The final fourth movement was overwhelming in its power. It conveyed a message of self-determination and liberation, that one can carve their own path, rather than being controlled by fate. The entire NACO ensemble came together as one, with individual notes merging into a single, clear purpose. The graceful movements of conductor Alexander Shelley's baton led, inspired, and challenged the orchestra, guiding it to greater heights.

Special mention must go to concertmaster Yosuke Kawasaki. He embodied the music's spirit, expressing it not just with his fingers but his entire body. When the music reached its climax, he rose from his chair to play. This energy transmitted to all the orchestra members. It was truly a remarkable performance.

Immediately after the performance, Nelson McDougall, Executive Director of the NAC Orchestra, confided in me, "It was a performance that miraculously came together amidst an incredibly busy schedule. We went into the performance with absolutely no rehearsal. But it was a superb outcome, and I'm really proud of it."

#### *Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 - Pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii*

On May 10th, Ottawa had the pleasure of welcoming Nobuyuki Tsujii for the first time. It marked his debut collaboration with NACO. Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 holds a special place in Tsujii's repertoire. He became the first



Japanese pianist to win the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in June 2009, and it was in the year preceding that triumph that he recorded Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Berlin German Symphony Orchestra conducted by Toyohiko Satoh.

I was fortunate to be invited to the rehearsal on the morning of the 10th. Tsujii took the stage in a casual outfit of jeans and a plaid hoodie, akin to his appearance in the concert. He played continuously from the first movement to the third in the rehearsal, creating a mesmerizing musical experience. The precision of conductor Alexander Shelley's baton work was evident as every note aligned beautifully. If one could see and touch music, it would resemble pearls in terms of depth and velvet in terms of texture. The synergy between Shelley, Tsujii, and NACO was exceptional. It felt as though they had been performing together for years, which was truly remarkable for a first-time collaboration.

The evening performance commenced at 8 p.m., and Tsujii's entrance was met with thunderous applause. He checked the keys, and a hush fell over the audience. Then, Tsujii softly introduced the E-minor chords, and with each note, the tension in the hall increased. As the piece progressed, the orchestra joined in with perfect synchronization, creating a dramatic effect. Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 starts with a piano solo, and it's the pianist who sets the tempo. The moment when the orchestra perfectly syncs with the pianist's tempo is when the magic happens. Tsujii's left hand, the double basses, and cellos blended as one. It was a musical experience that one can only truly grasp by hearing and feeling the vibrations in the air, rather than merely listening to a CD.

Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 is a challenging piece, filled with technical virtuosity, but it's also a treasure trove of beautiful melodies, frequently used in film scores. Therefore, it's not about showcasing technique but using technique as a means to create beautiful music. However, showcasing such virtuosity requires flawless execution. Tsujii and NACO became a united entity, delivering a concerto that was both ethereal and robust.

As the third movement concluded, the audience erupted in a wave of emotion and excitement, and the applause seemed never-ending. In response to the audience's enthusiasm, Tsujii performed an encore, Chopin's "Revolutionary Etude." It was an overwhelming performance.

## **Future**

The 2022-23 season comes to a close in May, and there is great anticipation for the 2023-24 season, which begins in October. Nelson McDougall, Executive Director, is busy coordinating NACO's international tours, including a performance at Carnegie Hall. They are also considering a Japan performance opportunity for the 2025 Osaka Expo. NACO's future is bright, and the day when every Japanese recognize as one of the world's premier orchestras is not far away.

(Kanji Yamanouchi)