

Music Paradise: Another Side of Canada

Episode 36 – June 19, 2025

Introduction

Warm greetings to all our supporters of Japan-Canada relations and music fans.

Here in Ottawa, June is truly the best time of year. On clear and sunny days, the harmony of the sky, clouds, water, and greenery soothes the eyes, the mind, and the body. Even on rainy days, the refreshing air after the rain is beyond words.

However, it is heartbreaking to see the increase in wildfires caused by abnormal weather stemming from global warming—one of the key issues discussed at the G7 Kananaskis Summit. Confronting nature is no easy task, but we hope wisdom and resolve will lead us to solutions.

And that brings us to music. Regardless of season or weather, music accompanies our daily lives in countless ways. But occasionally, history is made even in our daily routines. One such event was the recent Korea–Japan tour by the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO). It was their first-ever performance in Korea and their first visit to Japan in 40 years.

Frankly speaking, in terms of global recognition, NACO still has room to grow. Tokyo, in particular, is one of the world’s most competitive classical music markets, with elite orchestras performing daily. The audiences there are discerning, and the volume and quality of information are exceptional. In such a setting, NACO left a striking impression. The orchestra of Ottawa—the musical capital of “Music Paradise”—truly lived up to its name.

This column, therefore, focuses on NACO’s Japan tour.

An Overwhelming Success – The Key Was Perfect Preparation

In short, NACO’s Japan tour—its first in 40 years—was a resounding success.

Shortly after their return to Ottawa, I had a chance to speak with NACO’s President and CEO, Christopher Deacon. Normally composed and calm, he was visibly excited as he spoke about how wonderful the tour had been. The orchestra gave four performances: at Suntory

Hall in Tokyo, the Mie Center for the Arts in Tsu, the Osaka Symphony Hall, and the special Canada Pavilion venue at Expo 2025 Osaka. Each concert was memorable, and he said he was deeply moved by the audience's response.

Outside of the concerts, he couldn't stop talking about how unforgettable Japanese cuisine was—from refined kaiseki to teppanyaki and takoyaki, it was clear he had thoroughly enjoyed it.

Looking back, it's clear this tour succeeded because it was destined to—thanks to nearly three years of careful preparation. Personally, after arriving in Ottawa in May 2022, I soon became acquainted with CEO Deacon and Director of Artistic Planning Nelson McDougall. Over many dinners, receptions, and concerts, we often spoke about music.

By 2023, the Embassy of Japan began focusing efforts on promoting Expo 2025 in Osaka-Kansai. Around that time, Deacon and McDougall began sharing their vision of organizing a Japan tour to coincide with the Expo—the first NACO Japan tour in 40 years. What began as an ambitious idea gradually took shape into a grounded plan. From transporting 100 musicians and staff, handling logistics and costs, booking venues and selling tickets, to organizing publicity—the list of tasks was long.

Once the plan was set, McDougall began frequent visits to Japan to negotiate with local partners. But as Shakespeare—who captured life's truths so well—warned, “the devil is in the details.” At one point, NACO even had to change its Japanese agent at the last minute. Yet their unwavering commitment to performing during Expo 2025 Osaka helped them overcome every challenge.

McDougall surely spent many sleepless nights. But he helped craft a brilliant tour program that included not only Japan, but also a debut tour in Korea. It has earned a place in NACO's history.

To support this Korea-Japan tour, Ambassador Lim Woonsuk of Korea and I co-hosted a farewell dinner party in Ottawa. Alongside Shelley and Kawasaki and other Japanese- and Korean-Canadian musicians, we welcomed CEO Deacon, McDougall, and NACO's senior staff to the official residence. It was a delightful evening, and everyone felt confident about the tour's success.

June 3, 2025: Suntory Hall

Touching Japanese soil for the first time in 40 years, NACO opened its tour at Tokyo's world-renowned Suntory Hall, celebrated for its acoustics. The orchestra is a reflection of Canada's diversity—with members of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Some young musicians were not even born during the 1985 tour, while some veterans had been on that very trip. Leading them is Music Director and Principal Conductor Alexander Shelley, with Concertmaster Yosuke Kawasaki.

The program was carefully selected to showcase NACO's strengths and resonate with Japanese audiences, featuring music that also reflected cultural connections with Japan.

Keiko Devaux

The concert opened with a newly commissioned work by Japanese-Canadian composer Keiko Devaux, based in Montreal: "Listenings Under Water." In this piece, percussion instruments recreating the sound of water flow seamlessly lead the strings, guiding the listener into a sonically immersive, aqueous realm. Oriental tones and textures emerge throughout, reminiscent of a 21st-century Debussy-like impressionism—a true example of contemporary Canadian music at its best.

Rachmaninoff

Next came Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2, one of the most beloved in the repertoire. I had heard NACO perform this twice at the National Arts Centre.

The first time, in May 2023, was with pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii. I was lucky enough to observe the rehearsals—his casual yet precise focus was striking. The performance itself was astonishing, with Shelley, Kawasaki, Tsujii, and the full orchestra united in creating a musical utopia. Every note was calculated, controlled, and expressive, blending the orchestra's precision with the soloist's passionate spontaneity—an experience unmatched by any recording or stream. To witness, hear, and feel it in person was the pinnacle of musical joy.

The second time was at this very Suntory Hall concert, featuring soloist Olga Scheps. Her playing combined feminine sensitivity with brilliant, angular virtuosity. Shelley, ever attuned to his soloists' individuality, supported and inspired her with gentle provocation. The third movement's finale was met with thunderous applause.

Therefore I can vividly imagine how the collaboration between Shelley and Scheps impressed even the often critical and demanding audience at Suntory Hall.

Beethoven

The main course was Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, "Fate"—another NACO specialty. I've also heard it twice at the NAC.

One unforgettable performance occurred in April 2023, during the state visit of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. As part of Germany's official return gesture, this special concert at the National Arts Centre featured NACO under Shelley performing Fate.

Everyone knows this masterpiece. But this performance carried an intense, extraordinary energy. The moment Shelley lowered his baton and that famous "Da-da-da-dum" rang out, the music surged like a living force, seizing the room. Shelley conducted from memory, having internalized every note. Kawasaki led in sync, inspiring the orchestra. The finale brought overwhelming emotion. Afterward, I thanked German Ambassador Spausser, who was also deeply moved.

Later, McDougall told me that the concert came together under difficult conditions—due to last-minute schedule confirmations, Shelley had no time for full rehearsals. And yet, it became a powerful testament to NACO's true capability.

And now, Shelley's Fate resounded again at Suntory Hall. A friend who attended emailed me right after: "Shelley's Fate was overwhelming—goosebumps."

To Expo 2025 Osaka: "Shining Hat" (Canada Pavilion)

After the successful Tokyo concert, NACO headed west.

On June 5, they performed in Tsu City at the Mie Prefectural Cultural Center, presenting the same program as in Tokyo, again winning hearts. The next day, June 6, was the highlight: a special concert at the Canada Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai.

The theme: Oscar Peterson Tribute Concert.

Japan is perhaps the only country that reveres Oscar Peterson as deeply as Canada. As I discussed in episode 2 of this series, Peterson discovered Toshiko Akiyoshi, among other

achievements. The Embassy of Canada's auditorium in Tokyo is named Oscar Peterson Hall—his name symbolizes more than jazz in Japan; it represents Canada itself.

The concert fused classical and jazz elements, transcending generations and borders—a testament to Shelley's artistic vision. The highlight was *Trail of Dreams: A Canadian Suite*, a reworking of Peterson's masterpiece *Canadian Suite* for orchestra and jazz trio. For Peterson, who grew up in Montreal studying classical piano, blending jazz and classical was a natural pursuit of new sound worlds—modernizing the spirit of Debussy and Ravel.

Finally, Shelley led *Hymn to Freedom*, Peterson's signature piece—sometimes called Canada's second national anthem. It first appeared on the 1962 album *Night Train*, which Peterson dedicated to his father, a Dominican immigrant who worked hard as a railway worker and raised his son with wisdom and love. The orchestral and children's choir rendition of this piece brought the audience to tears and cheers.

Conclusion

An orchestra's true strength isn't defined by fame. But once its power is proven, recognition inevitably follows. With this tour, NACO has entered that virtuous cycle. Expectations are higher than ever.

Shelley, Kawasaki, and the entire NACO team have returned from Korea and Japan triumphant—but there's no time to rest. Up next is a performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* at the National Arts Centre. Having grown through this tour, we can expect them to bring a new level of artistry. Ottawa's music lovers are eager with anticipation.

This season also marks the end of Alexander Shelley's 11-year tenure as Music Director. From next year, he will assume the same role with the Pacific Symphony in Orange County, California. Though founded in 1978—about 10 years younger than NACO—the Pacific Symphony is known for premiering works like Elliot Goldenthal's *Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio*, which featured Yo-Yo Ma.

With the perfect balance of tradition and innovation, structure and freedom, Shelley has guided NACO into a new era. We wish him continued success and good fortune in all his endeavors.

(End)