

“The Spiritual Power of Bach’s Organ Music in Japan”
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by Roger W. Lowther

There was nothing much attractive about the organ or the room. Blaring speakers attempted to compensate for bad acoustics and an old two-manual electronic organ. Yet, this didn’t stop 300 people from crowding the room beyond capacity! The back wall was lined with people. The loft area was full. The lobby was full of people who heard nothing but what came through crackly ceiling speakers. What attracted all these people? Was it the organist? Hardly! (I was the organist.) It was the music of Bach.



Japan is such a contrast to America, where many churches are throwing out their organs in order to bring in people. Hear this! Organ music is a great way to bring people into the church in Japan! My family and I moved to Japan in the summer of 2005 through Mission to the World, the foreign mission agency of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since then, I have been shocked by the overwhelming excitement of the Japanese people for the music of Bach.

Perhaps the best-known advocate for the music of Bach in Japan is Masaaki Suzuki, organist and founder of the Bach Collegium Japan, which has recorded many of Bach’s works including the complete cantata cycle. The St. Matthew Passion and the Christmas Oratoria are performed every year to sold-out halls with tickets upwards of \$600 each!

Bach’s organ music also clearly communicates the gospel. Japanese culture is distinctly indirect, so any reference to what you believe is suspect. However, people are open to hear what Bach believed when the performer can speak as a third party. Bach’s original intent for much of his music is to teach about the Christian faith and nourish the spirit. Think of the Orgelbuchlein and the Clavier-Übung III!

Mrs. Hatta used to meet with me every Thursday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. to help me practice my Japanese. She would help me talk about all kinds of subjects: art, politics, Japanese history and culture...EVERYTHING but religion. After one particular Easter concert, though, she had obviously been crying and had trouble telling me something. “I can’t talk right now,” she sputtered in broken Japanese. “...It was...can’t talk right now...” And she left.

The encounter was a bit of a mystery to me because I had never seen such a strong emotional reaction from her before. I waited patiently until our next language session to continue the conversation. “It was the music,” she told me. “I had never thought about hope that way before...” From then on, God and Christianity were no longer off-limits.

In a December 2005 article from the Atlanta Times, Maestro Suzuki affirmed that “Bach is teaching us the Christian concept of hope.” He went on to explain “After each concert [of Bach’s music], people crowd the podium wishing to talk to me about topics that are normally taboo in this society: death, for example. Then they inevitably ask me what ‘hope’ means to Christians...I believe that Bach has already converted tens of thousands of Japanese to the Christian faith.”

It is interesting to note that the Japanese language does not contain a good word for the Christian concept of hope. The word *nozomu*, translated as hope, is like our expression “I hope I do well on the exam” or “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow.” The word *kibou* may be translated as a wish for the future,

but there is no word to express an eager expectation of something that will certainly happen, a kind of hope that gives life meaning.

Pastors from many parts of the globe have asked me “If things don’t work out in Japan, would you please consider working with us?” There is a huge need for organists to work with mission teams and national church planters around the globe. Spread the word! The organ is not dying out! Our gifts and those of generations after us are needed, and it is fitting that old Mr. Bach has made organ music vital to the spiritual lives of so many around the world.

(Roger Lowther received his Master of Music in Organ Performance from The Juilliard School, where he studied with Dr. John Weaver, and served as the organist at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis from 1998 to 2002. You can read more about the work in Japan at www.missionart.org or may contact him at rogerlowther@gmail.com.)