

chelfitsch & Dai Fujikura with Klangforum Wien (Austria) “Work-In-Progress for Music Theatre Production” Fourth Report: Performance and Reflection

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Toward the work-in-progress performance

With the location moved to the Small Hall of Tower Hall Funabori, where the work-in-progress performance would be held, November began with several days of “story sessions.”

“Story sessions” are a standard warm-up in OKADA Toshiki’s creative process. Sitting in a circle, the actors listen to an episode related by the previous member and reenact it themselves. Then, they add their own story. This is repeated by the next member and then the next. (The topic of the story can be anything, such as something that happened on the way to the rehearsal room, or the actor’s recent hobbies.) Resembling an “acting telephone game,” the method is one that Okada often uses in theatrical workshops for students and children as well. Although I have never participated directly, and it is only my impression as a bystander, I feel like the method’s advantage lies in molding one’s own imagination physically and psychologically to assimilate another person’s experiences through this playful process. The irregular, hearsay-style reporting (and attempts at such) that materializes in this manner, reminiscent of a medium channeling a spirit, quite naturally brings out what can be described as a very “chelfitsch-style” performance.

Becoming another person is a basic element of acting. However, rather than trying to erase the self, I suspect that the multiplexing, fluctuations, and friction in identity produced by tracing or overwriting another’s imagination as if it were one’s own while maintaining oneself have something in common with the “layers” to which Okada frequently alluded within this creative process, as well as the “running side by side” that I mentioned in the previous report.



Photo: KATO Kazuya

Partly because it was the first time the cast had come together in about three months, the main point on the first day was to restore the sense attained in the previous workshops while further expanding it. Owing somewhat to the fact that the performance in front of an audience was only four days away (November 5), everyone seemed to share a more practical feeling of tension. This kind of immediate tension is stimulating as

well as desirable, but as an observer, I also felt like the openness of the laboratory in July and the more relaxed pace with no hurry to complete the work had receded, which was a pity. The fact that it was just after the performance of *Yuzuru*, Okada’s first chance to work on an opera, may have also had some effect.

On the other hand, one thing to be welcomed was the fresh addition of elements to improve the precision of the laboratory—namely, the participation of the engineering team composed mainly of sound staff from the Born Creative Festival organized by FUJIKURA Dai at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre. Although the remote system built by Nagie had been utilized to full effect in the July workshops, it was now further enhanced. Multiple microphones and cameras were installed inside the theater along with oversized wireless communication equipment resembling military communication devices. Thus, higher-definition audiovisual information could be transmitted to Fujikura in London.

To quote Fujikura in an interview during the workshops, “the functions of a studio were transferred directly to the theater.” This enabled his work operating production equipment at hand to be delivered to Tokyo in real time, as well as footage of the practice in Tokyo to be transmitted to Fujikura in London without any delays. Establishing this environment, which required dedicated staff and technical gear for communication, set a fairly high bar in terms of both the budget and technology, one that would be utterly unaffordable for an individual or single-company production. However, as a positive example of a new creative environment produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, it deserves mention that if leading public theaters in Japan and overseas used similar systems for cooperation, it seems that they could definitely establish specialized remote creative environments usable even after the pandemic.



Photo: KATO Kazuya

So, how did practice with Okada and the actors change? It may have been because he was more conscious of giving shape to the work than in the July workshops, but my impression was that more of the analogies that Okada used with the actors were specific things explicitly eliciting images of weight and gravitation—an anchor that “refuses to budge,” or a great several-hundred-year-old tree spreading its roots to secure its position. The actors, too, used expressions such as “building a brick house for the three little pigs” (AOYAGI Izumi). In an interview that I conducted following the July workshops, I had told Okada I was “surprised that creation with such capable actors begins from a ground zero that is so unrefined, in a positive sense.” Okada had responded, “It’s largely because they’re so capable. And when creating something, starting by grappling in the mud of the foundation leads to better results in the end.” Weighty ex-

changes continued, evoking the process of mud becoming sand and then brick and gaining materiality.

After a fitting session for the performance (although all of the “costumes” were the actors’ own clothes) and a break, practice resumed with Fujikura’s participation.

Okada: In this phase, I’d like to experiment with how far to mold imagination into the performances. To put it simply, instead of Fujikura’s music being tied to the characters’ emotions, I think that it’d be interesting if it was connected to the characters’ imaginations...if the music could look like it was depicting that. This is an area where I’m influenced by having staged an opera.

Hearing Okada recount the experience he gained from *Yuzuru*, Fujikura retorted slyly, “Welcome to the world of opera!” It seemed as if Fujikura had already predicted that the experience of working on an opera would change Okada’s views on “musical theater.”

Something rather unique about the work-in-progress performance on the final day was that the actors’ performances, based on the approximately 10-minute play that Okada had newly written for the production, were to be staged with two different versions of accompaniments: one with footage of the five members of Klangforum Wien (string quartet and clarinet) playing filmed in advance in Vienna, and another with the Japanese string quartet Ensemble NOMAD (HANADA Wakako and KAWAGUCHI Shizuka on the violin, KAI Fumiko on the viola, and HOSOI Yui on the cello) and YOSHIDA Makoto on the clarinet playing live. The former, with the progression of the music determined in advance, and the latter, with the actors and musicians interacting, would naturally result in performances with different qualities. However, there were also commonalities.

Okada commented as follows regarding the performance of KAWASAKI Mariko, who had the first lines in the play.

Okada: I thought that it was good that she didn’t start speaking as soon as the music started. Although the play begins with a call from a real estate agent, imagining the voice on the phone, which is unpleasant to her, acts as a switch. If she thinks about the music this way, she might be able to impart a subliminal meaning for the audience.

Then, her performance naturally became bigger by working with the music, and I think that’s a good thing. It’s like hitting back hard when you’re hit first. I feel like imagination and the kind of performance that spreads from it will make it easier for her to create certain physical movements and states from the core of the image she has now.

The method of acting in which the actor outputs a physical and psychological reaction to a certain phenomenon that occurs is the same for both recording and live music. But this is commonplace. What makes Okada’s directing unique is that it encourages recombination of the circuits of the input phenomena and the output via the actor’s imagination.

Okada: If an actor bursts into tears in response to the music, the music will become tied to crying. In other words, it’s too broad.

But no matter how concrete the things we imagine are, they don’t exist. Still, imagination and the music are tied firmly together. Even if only a little, you push the image of the voice as if it were something

that actually exists. And yet, no matter how much you push it, it remains nonexistent and invisible. That’s why Kawasaki’s character is comfortable despite the external enemy.

Spinning off from this discussion, Fujikura pointed out the following regarding the changes he expected to see in the live-music version.

Fujikura: When the musicians actually join, they’ll probably be influenced by the actors’ speaking tempo and phrases. This made me wonder whether it’ll be difficult for the musicians to ignore the actors’ performances because they understand Japanese. But as Austrian musicians who don’t understand Japanese won’t understand the meanings of the words, I feel like something interesting could happen.

Suggestions for collaboration gleaned from music production

Going slightly off topic, I would like to quote another fascinating comment by Fujikura.

Fujikura: When there’s a conductor, the ensemble or orchestra plays according to the conductor’s notions, so without a conductor, it inevitably becomes more democratic. Each of the five members plays while sensing the others. It’s a very interesting situation. Even if the performance in 2023 has more than five players, I think it can still be written so as not to require a conductor.

As my interests skew toward contemporary theater (or rather, the formalistic and postmodern trend in Japanese theater, of which the emergence of Okada Toshiki and chelfitsch is a historical node), I have focused on describing the theatrical aspects, especially for the July workshops. However, what surprised me while observing the November workshops was the meticulousness of the arrangements for the creation of the music, which did not assume extemporaneity.

Considering the schedule and workshop program, the music used was constructed by cutting and pasting fragments of several of Fujikura’s past compositions. However, this definitely did not mean that the work was easy. As the performance would include live playing by an ensemble, the entire score written for the production needed to be given to each musician in advance. If the work required composing from scratch, like a new opera, this would take an exponentially greater amount of time. The full orchestra would not be able to practice until just before the performance, and plans would need to be made while constantly anticipating the feasibility of the orchestration and tones. The composer’s role would become almost as rigid as that of structural design in architecture.

On the other hand, as long as there is a completed score, a professional musician has the skills to reproduce the music perfectly with just a bit of practice. If anything, this is the domain of Western music, which was backed by a firm system for artistic expression premised on reproduction before the birth of replicated art.

Instead, whether contemporary art, theater, or music, artistic expression in the modern era, which relies greatly on the primacy of the agent of expression, has affirmed the accidents and happenings contained in “extemporaneity”—the singularity or uniqueness that cannot occur without a particular person, time, and place—as something welcome. Okada Toshi-

ki and chelfitsch, who have constructed their own styles and forms with a high degree of precision, are no exception. Often employing the production method of a work in progress, they are, needless to say, extremely modernistic artists. Given that fact, the offer from Wiener Festwochen to “create a new work related to music of a genre originating in the West” begins to seem like an immensely difficult task.

That is why Fujikura’s comment I cited earlier is so significant. The reason he put a string quartet at the core of the creation is that this configuration makes it possible to look for musicians anywhere, and it is the smallest unit that can guarantee musical range through the playing method of each instrument. Clarinetist Yoshida Makoto and the members of Ensemble NOMAD also have past experience with Fujikura’s creation, making them musicians with full knowledge of the intentions and tendencies of a composer. This creates a flexible framework with a strategy to avoid the risk of creation collapsing, while also remaining responsive to the improvisational creation required of contemporary theater.

Although interdisciplinary cooperation/collaboration is common at artistic events these days, my impression is that the point of these projects is usually a creative explosion born from singular encounters among artists inhabiting different disciplines.

Of course, multiyear medium-term frameworks occasionally appear as well, but even these are very much like anomalous training camps or retreats temporarily provided for the ongoing activities of individual artists. It seems unlikely that the experiences and techniques acquired there will be worked up to a level resembling a “system.” One might call it the “chronic ailment” of arts and culture in a globalized economy where quarterly closing of accounts is the norm, but the framework of this project, one of interdisciplinary co-creation, real exchanges between contemporary art and classical art and accumulated outcomes, and international joint production, which does not rely excessively on the fashions of the day, the fickle desires of consuming audiences, or the moods of artists and planners, needs to be questioned.

In this sense as well, the *Music Theatre Production* project, which has set the not-so-distant year 2023 as its finish line, seems to be of great significance. Although I have only touched on them slightly in this report, it contains more than a few promising seeds and hints, such as the verification of specialized remote engineering. Something like a hackathon or open hub focused on fine-art or performing-art productions might also be possible.



Photo: KATO Kazuya

Summary (or an abrupt ending that does not fully serve as one)

I am nearing the prescribed word count, and although there are countless scenes and comments that it would be a shame not to include, I must hasten to finish this text. Thus, I would like to conclude by presenting my emailed interview with Hanada Wakako, who played in the work-in-progress performance as a member of Ensemble Nomad. The following are some of her post-performance impressions that I have compiled.

— How were the sessions with Okada Toshiki and the actors?

Hanada: Even though I’ve provided recorded music for theater and dance works before, I’ve never played onstage as part of one. Not only that, but instead of a finished work, we joined during the production process, so the other members and I all began with confusion and puzzlement. I feel like it ended while we were still exploring the meaning of our presence onstage and the demands of the live playing, but it was an extremely exciting experience.

The “intersection of the world that the actors imagine in order to speak their lines with the world that the musicians imagine in order to play the music” that Okada talked about on the first day of practice was especially fascinating—the fact that these imagined worlds, which cannot be expressed (or are not visible) externally, cross each other through the acting and playing.

— Playing usually follows a score, but this performance included experiments with improvisation, where you adjusted the transitions of the compositions according to the actors’ performances. How did you feel about dealing with this at the same time as the music?

Hanada: In conventional operas and musical works with recitation, the measure of the music is predetermined, and the relationship between the music and words consists of timing the words to it. However, with this work I had the chance to experience a new kind of relationship, one in which the music is timed to the lines spoken by the actors. As the actors’ lines are something living, I realized that this kind of relationship with the music is possible, and I anticipated that it might even create a more equal relationship between the music and the lines. (Perhaps this is what is required of “musical theater” that is neither a musical nor a theatrical work?)

A major feature of this work is that it strives to create an integrated relationship, with the music equal to the acting rather than just background music. Still, when it came to moving to the next composition without playing the previous one all the way through, as a musician, not being able to play the composer’s work all the way to the end felt like a waste. In the beginning, I was caught up in thinking that music is “complete” when the last note is played, so it felt strange to move on to the next composition while the previous one was unfinished. However, through my interactions with Fujikura, I was relieved to learn that it didn’t necessarily matter to him as composer whether each composition was “played all the way to the end.”

As for the technical side of things, due to the nature of the relationship with the music, I really struggled with having to listen for the flow of the actors’ lines while playing. In particular, as it was ensemble piece without a conductor, when I focused on making music as part of the ensemble, I would sometimes unconsciously stop hearing the lines and miss their timing, but when I tried to listen to the lines, there were moments when I would become a bit detached from my playing. On the first day, I thought, “I wish I had two brains!”

— How did you feel about the concept of the music assuming the role of an “outsider” or “other”?

Hanada: There were two combinations, one with live music and one with video footage. When I saw the rehearsal with the video, I felt like it gave a stronger impression of an “outsiderness/otherness” (in the sense that there was no response to changes in the actors). On the other hand, when we performed live, whether consciously or subconsciously, we couldn’t help reacting to the delivery and movements of the actors. In that sense, I feel like we produced a sense of “outsiderness/otherness” completely different from that of the video. If the onstage configuration were switched from the current one, with the actors and musicians all in a nearly straight line, to one with us arranged in a V shape facing each other slightly or with some members in front or behind, it might change how we, the musicians, perceive the actors’ movements and energy.

These responses provide many realizations and implications, but to summarize them roughly, just like the changes in the actors in response to the music that I described earlier, it seems that the actors’ performances also had a strong influence on the musicians. Due in part to the fact that there was limited time for creation, that influence tended to be a strain on the information processing necessary for playing. However, there is surely much to be gained from repeated practice and concept sharing. Meanwhile, the embodiment of “outsiderness” or “otherness” sought by the work, as pointed out by Hanada, holds the potential for various trials.

For example, it might be possible to explore larger structures such as introducing the musical systems and rules of “reproduction from a score” that I mentioned in the previous section as another element of otherness to theater. Okada’s work in recent years includes attempts to “hack” the systems and histories of classical performing arts like Noh drama, opera, and ballet on a contextual level. The abstract concept of “musical theater” sought through this project can allow for diverse forms of experimentation not limited to practical performances. As I look forward to the finished form of *Music Theatre Production* in 2023, I hope that the various discoveries and results obtained along the way will grow and take hold with a reach that extends beyond artistic creation.