

Yoshihara, Mari. 2007. *Musicians from a Different Shore Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. xiv + 269 pages. ISBN 978 1 59213 333 8

‘You don’t have to be English to play Elgar’: *The globalisation of Western music*

NICHOLAS TARLING

Mari Yoshihara, Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, tells us that, like many middle-class girls in the Japan of the 1960s and 1970s, she learned the piano: her ‘musical sensibility’ was ‘Western’, her ‘identity’ the piano (p.viii). She did not, however, go to conservatory. The kind of femininity associated with so doing had no appeal. That, her growing political awareness, and, as she amusingly admits, her “utter frustration” with a Liszt Paganini étude, led her to enrol at the University of Tokyo and major in American Studies. Subsequently she wrote her book *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (2002). Then she decided to return to music and also to write a book on Asians and classical music. What she had so far done in her life turned out to be good preparation for that task, and she has written a good book, without too many jargonistic cadenzas and only a few rather jarring notes from a not very apposite Pierre Bourdieu.

Aspirations and application

The globalisation of Western music is

indeed an excellent topic, open to research historical and sociological as well as musical. Its extension does not derive solely from its potent aesthetic appeal, but also from political, economic and social changes in the imperial and post-imperial worlds, as a result of which it was spread from the European to the non-European world and made welcome there. Many people of Asian origin now pursue the art form abroad as well as at home, as a visit to a Western conservatory or attendance at an orchestral concert in the West will readily confirm. Their aspirations, as Yoshihara argues, are shaped by structural factors – such as the opportunity to be ‘modern’ in their own society, their need to find a place in a different society – as well as by the presence of personal talent and the capacity for unremitting application.

Much of her book depends on interviews carried out with ‘Asian American’ musicians working in the New York area. Yoshihara at first thought her analysis of their ‘investment’ in classical music would rely on familiar academic concepts and categories, such as class, race, gender, imperialism, hegemony. Though those clearly continued to affect her work, she happily

realised that they were not sufficient: “the profound and real connections that music – and musicians – create among people of different parts of the world seemed irreducible to categories like race, nation and imperialism” (p.xii). The vocabulary she was using was both too big and too small to encompass the musicians’ relationship with music. Happily, too, her own return to piano-playing led Yoshihara both to reflect on her own questions – “in all honesty, where and how I grew up felt rather irrelevant as I was trying to distinguish the tone colour in different voices in the Rachmaninoff D-major prelude” (p.xiii) – and to empathise with those to whom she put the questions.

Most of them were pianists or string-players, and most were women. First in Japan, and then in South Korea and China, the piano after all became, as in 19th century Europe, a proper family acquisition, an indicator of social prestige, a domestic focus. Singers are not numerous. Some of the respondents are major figures – like Kent Nagano and Cho-Liang Lin – while others are at a less advanced stage in their career. Their experiences are diverse, their attitudes less so.

Questions of identity

‘Identity’ was an initial focus of the interviews. Questions of ‘identity’ are indeed fashionable in academe as in government, and like other fashions themselves pass without much question. What does the word ‘identity’ mean? The recent census in the country in which I live was keen to find out with which ‘ethnic group’ respondents ‘identified’. I wrote that I could not answer. I was not sure which group I ‘identified’ with, or indeed if I ‘identified’ with any. And I was not at all sure that governments should be encouraged to divide their citizens up in that way or to imply that we found our ‘identity’ in that way. ‘Identity’ is, if I understand it, a complex rather than a simple matter. Probably, given the chance, I would put ‘historian’ first among several constituents.

The majority of Yoshihara’s respondents seemed to feel something similar. They thought of themselves above all as musicians. “[T]his musical identity is a more salient factor than socially defined categories such as race or identity”. Other aspects of Asians’ identity were ‘highly fluid’. (p. 227) Yoshihara seems at times a little disappointed, pointing out that the musicians

had little academic training other than in music, lacked historical knowledge. But it might also be that, though in very different circumstances, they thought rather as I did in facing the New Zealand census, that it was not that kind of identity that came first. Their dedication was to music, and it was through music that they ‘found’ it.

The question of ‘identity’ had no doubt another origin besides fashion. When Asian musicians appeared in the West in numbers in the 1970s and 1980s, it was sometimes argued that, though technically expert in classical music, they could not truly enter its spirit. Questions of ‘ethnicity’ were a softer version of the ‘racism’ that implied. The argument was never, however, convincing, smacking too much of sour grapes. Different training, the traditions of different conservatories and of different orchestras, different schools of instrumental playing, were at issue, not race or ethnic identity. You did not have to be English to play Elgar. He had, after all, been pioneered by Germans and admired in Germany. Possibly, too, a different approach revealed an additional aspect of his genius. Our contemporary globalisation may lead to diversity not to uniformity.

Forthright responses

Some of the most prominent Asian musicians that Yoshihara contacted declined to be interviewed, she tells us. It seemed that they thought she was “trying to make an argument for the racially and culturally based nature of music-making, a view with which they did not wish to be associated”. (p. 199) Those that did respond come out well in this book, thanks to their own forthrightness and the author’s honesty. “I found that most classical musicians’ everyday lives and work do not revolve around their Asian identities or the politics of East-West relations. ... what occupies them the most is the painstaking work of becoming better musicians”. (p. 231)

The book is almost entirely concerned with musicians from East Asia, though a few others appear. There is plenty of scope for further work that would provide a comparative context. How do Asian musicians fare in Europe or in Latin America? And is the story an ‘Asian’ one or an ‘East Asian’ one? In Southeast Asia, for example, the Malaysian Philharmonic vies with the Singapore Symphony, and Bangkok Opera is working its way through a Ring cycle. Yoshihara seems to share the rather widespread gloom about the future of classical music, talking of ageing audiences and deficient funding. But in some ways the prospects are exciting.

Nicholas Tarling

New Zealand Asia Institute,
The University of Auckland
n.tarling@auckland.ac.nz



One of the musicians interviewed by Mari Yoshihara was the Japanese American conductor Kent Nagano.