

# Cultural immersion puts singer ahead

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**T**alent alone isn't enough for an opera singer to rise to international stardom. Just ask Akiko Nakajima, the first Japanese soprano to perform principal roles at the prestigious Vienna Volksoper.

Her rise to the top has involved surmounting language and cultural barriers as well as dedication to perfecting herself as a "singing actress."

A native of Kushiro, Hokkaido, Nakajima was aware of her musical gift as a child.

"Being a singer is just as natural as being Japanese," said Nakajima in a recent interview in Tokyo ahead of rehearsals for the New National Theater production of "La Bohème," scheduled for later this month, in which she will play Musetta, one of the leading roles.

The singer's interest in classical music came from her father, a devoted amateur musician who often told his daughter how passionately he used to practice the "piano"—actually a keyboard drawn on paper—during the postwar years when he couldn't afford the real thing. Later, their home was always filled with music, with her father playing the piano or violin.

Nakajima says she decided to pursue singing at age 12, when chosen to perform a solo at a school music festival.

"The whole school was silent when I sang. I thought, 'What incredible power music can have!'" she recalls.

But life took an unexpected turn when she moved to Sydney at age 15 due to her father's work.

"The Aussie way of life was more relaxed," says Nakajima.

The Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where she trained, was no

exception.

"My teacher said, 'Don't worry. You've got a voice. You'd better learn about Western culture and learn to speak English,'" she says.

The singer is now grateful that her struggle with the language and culture during those years helped her prepare for the international career she was later to pursue.

"The strong (cultural) confrontations made me think that I have to believe in myself and have to be understood by other people," she says.

A big turning point came when Nakajima, who was still a student, won the Australian Singing Competition in August 1990. This first recognition paved the way for her debut in 1990 at the Sydney Opera House, singing the role of Servilia in Mozart's "La Clemenza di Tito."

This success brought her offers for three other productions at the opera house, which would have guaranteed her a long-lasting career in Australia. But she chose instead to venture to Europe, where she debuted as Musetta in 1992 at the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, Italy, before performing at the Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck, Austria, until 1997.

"Many people thought I was stupid because the pay was not so great, the theater was unknown and I was turning down productions with the Sydney Opera House," she says.

But learning about European culture by experiencing everyday life there proved highly inspiring and crucial for her career as an opera singer.

"Europe was a dream place for me because it's where opera began. I'd always wondered, unless you really know the people who created this culture, how can you possibly perform their arts? How can you play Musetta, a character from Paris? It

must be understood instinctively," she says.

Perhaps one of the most innovative performances by Nakajima took place at Germany's Staatsoper Darmstadt, where Nakajima was on contract from 1997 to 1999. Her portrayal of the title role in a production of Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" earned her a nomination for best singer in the prestigious classical music magazine Opernwelt.

For the famous scene in which the heroine goes insane, Nakajima not only wrote her own cadenza, as many singers do, but also selected a team of musicians and singers with whom she created a ghostly atmosphere reminiscent of Noh, using wood blocks and timpani.

"That sort of challenge was daring. You don't go there to please everybody. If you touch someone, that's more important," the singer says.

In September 1999, Nakajima made a widely acclaimed debut at the Vienna Volksoper in the role of Sonja in Franz Lehár's "Der Zarewitsch" and has since captivated audiences at the prestigious opera house with her powerful singing and acting in such roles as Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata."

Now the singer says she's relaxed and happy living in Vienna with her 4-year-old daughter, 1-year-old son and Danish conductor husband.

Since 1999, Nakajima has also been making her presence felt in Japanese musical circles.

She has recently found a source of inspiration in traditional performing arts including Kabuki and Noh dance.

"After so many years of being in this profession, if I'm to demand more artistic expression of myself, I have to think of my roots," explains Nakajima, who is learning the subtle body movements of



HIROSHI NAKAMURA/ THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

After years abroad, Akiko Nakajima is turning to Japan for inspiration.

traditional *buyo* dance. "It enriches me as an artist to have that side to myself."

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Akiko Nakajima appears in "La Bohème" at the New National Theater in Tokyo on April 19 (3 p.m.), April 23 (6:30 p.m.) and April 26 (3 p.m.). Tickets for Z seats,

specially priced at 1,500 yen, go on sale at the box office at 10 a.m. on the day of the performance. See listing on Page 30.

Nakajima will return to Japan in October to perform as Suzanna in the New National Theater's production of "The Marriage of Figaro."