

Soprano Nakajima spans West and East in 'Pierrot Lunaire'

By Hiroko Oikawa

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Vienna-based soprano Akiko Nakajima is premiering her production tour of *Mugen Noh—Pierrot Lunaire*, a marriage of 20th-century Western music and Japanese noh theater, across Japan, culminating on Dec. 10 in Tokyo.

Ten years in the making, it will debut just in time for the 100th anniversary of *Pierrot lunaire*, *melodrama for voice & chamber ensemble*, Op. 21, by Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg.

Nakajima performs as Pierrot, collaborating with master Junnosuke Watanabe of the Hosho school of noh from Kanazawa.

Nakajima did not plan the unlikely combination. "It just happened," she said. Her encounter with the cycle of 21 isolated songs—a narrative of a wandering Pierrot's experiences—goes back many years to when her conductor husband, Niels Muus, recommended it to her.

"I didn't like it. I didn't understand it. But it was such a shock, it stayed in my mind," Nakajima recalled.

Later the strangest music she had ever heard fascinated her, but she still found it too difficult to perform. Then came an awakening after she heard about temples in Kyoto dedicated to moon-viewing, leading her to learn about the two contrasting interpretations of the moon: the European conception, which is not positive, as in the word "lunatic," in contrast to the Asian appreciation of the full moon's beauty that inspires poetry and other cultural activities.

Equipped with this knowledge, Nakajima was in a temple looking up at the moon and doing zen meditation. She said, "In this peacefulness, in my mind came the music of *Pierrot Lunaire*...I thought, what a perfect combination!"

She could see how the slow movements of noh and Schoenberg's music, both of which have no rhythm, would make a perfect marriage.

Nakajima learned further from a noh master that *mugen noh* (pieces featuring departed souls and spirits) is deeply connected with the moon.

"Under the moonlight, spirits come and tell stories...When the moonlight disappears, the spirits also disappear. I thought this is a great theme for *Pierrot lunaire*," Nakajima said, adding that Pierrot also disappears in the green daylight. "I wonder if [the songwriter Albert] Giraud read about noh."

There is good musical chemistry between the two. "The flute solo, such as in the seventh song, *The Sick Moon*—which must be played almost out of pitch—would be perfectly done with a *nokan flute* from noh theater...It's difficult for the performers to get the right pitch...Trying to play in-between is the extreme high art of noh...It is almost like the sound Schoenberg was looking for," Nakajima said.

In the three-part original, Nakajima inserted noh stories associated with the moon, some blended with Schoenberg songs and some separately presented as noh.

The first part, called *The Tale of Night*, presents a beautiful maiden with an evening white primrose that opens with the moonlight. Played by Watanabe, she dances to the Schoenberg piece called *A pale washerwoman*. "I'm showing the most fragile dancing form of noh," Nakajima said.

The second part, *The Nightmare*, features the same person now betrayed and turned into Hannya, a sad and sensitive character who must eat humans to live.



Courtesy of Masaaki Saito

Akiko Nakajima during a rehearsal

"I'm showing the dramatic side, played with the big drum called *otsuzumi* and the flute," she said.

The third part, *Nostalgia*, features Watanabe singing and dancing as well as three voices chanting *jiutai noh* songs from the piece titled *Obasute*.

Above all, what Nakajima is looking for is the coexistence of two different worlds.

"Here is one of the oldest performing arts of noh very authentically played. What Mr. Watanabe is doing is nothing but traditional...It is this illusion of coexisting in a different hemisphere, almost like virtual reality," she said. "The two worlds sometimes challenge each other, and finally meet in the last scene through the moonlight."

More than 10 years of her accumulated ideas came alive as she got to work with Vienna-based pianist Masaaki Saito, who trained under a Schoenberg specialist, conductor Niels Muus, noh instrument performers, and chamber musicians from the Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa.

Still another fascinating facet is artist Shinya Takaoka's screen, set midstage, which presents the Japanese translation of the lyrics, evoking the mood of the poetry.

An internationally acclaimed soprano, Nakajima has performed in the Vienna Volks Opera, among others, and worked with conductors including Lorin Maazel, Zubin Mehta and Seiji Ozawa. She is currently adviser to the Music Festival Steyr and artistic adviser to the Mozarthaus Vienna, both in Austria.

Her hard work has already received encouragement from Schoenberg's daughter and sons, who have seen video clips of earlier rehearsals. Nakajima is flattered that Nuria, Schoenberg's daughter, said the simplicity and beauty of the noh theater goes extremely well with *Pierrot Lunaire*. *Pierrot* will keep Nakajima busy with her plans to bring it to New York, Paris, Venice and the Netherlands.

Akiko Nakajima will perform in "Mugen Noh—Pierrot Lunaire" on Dec. 10 at 7 p.m. at Sumida Triphony Hall near JR Kinshicho Station in Tokyo. For tickets, call (03) 5608-1212 or visit www.triphony.com