

Suntory Hall at Age 20 – Three Reasons that Make this Hall a Success

By Dr. Minoru Nagata, Founder of Nagata Acoustics

On October 12, 1986, the late Keizo Saji, Suntory President, stood at the keyboard of the new hall's pipe organ and struck the A note, signaling the opening of Suntory Hall. With the birth of Suntory Hall, Japan's classical music world took a great stride forward. Suntory Hall and the other major new halls that followed in its wake earned prominence and respect internationally as well as at home. As one of the participants in the project to design and construct Suntory Hall, and as a music lover, I will take this opportunity to remark on three of the hall's successes.

1. Suntory Hall brought the vineyard configuration into the mainstream of concert hall design, and contributed significantly to this configuration gaining adherents and advocates throughout the world.

From the post-World War II era to the 1980s, cities such as Tokyo developed unquenched thirsts for classical music concert halls. At the time, the sole ideal concert hall to emulate was Vienna's Musikverein. This hall has the configuration commonly known as the "shoebox" shape. The shoebox configuration also held sway among academic experts in the field, who focused on the acoustically desirable propagation of lateral sound reflections in rectangular spaces of narrow width.

Into this setting of actively used, historically venerated halls, the radical idea was conceived of configuring a hall with stepped balcony sections placed so that their front wall surfaces would produce early sound reflections, and in 1963 a new hall came into being with a configuration based on this novel concept. This was the hall named, simply, Neue Philharmonie. It was located in West Berlin and was to serve as the home hall of the Berlin Philharmonic under the baton of Maestro Herbert von Karajan. However, perhaps because the distinctive orchestral style Maestro Karajan developed in this hall took precedence among critics, the uniquely shaped hall's reputation did not flourish as might have been hoped. Using the hall evaluation method proposed by Dr. Leo Beranek, one of the world's leading acousticians, Neue Philharmonie Hall did not attain the highest possible rating. Nevertheless, Mr. Saji enjoyed a friendship with Maestro Karajan and he decided to take the Maestro's advice and make Suntory Hall Japan's first vineyard configuration concert hall.

In the early days after Suntory Hall's opening, when local Tokyo orchestras performed in the new hall, they evaluated it using the halls they knew as their frame of reference, and the halls they knew, such as Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, all had stages surrounded by sound-reflecting surfaces. As a result, the local orchestras' first impressions of Suntory Hall were less than stellar. By contrast, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra gave Suntory Hall glowing reviews, as did other European and U.S. orchestras that performed there. After Suntory Hall pioneered the vineyard configuration in Japan, the Sapporo Concert Hall project followed suit with a vineyard configuration, giving both domestic and overseas orchestras more opportunities to experience playing in vineyard configuration halls. As audiences and performers grew accustomed to the sound these halls produce and the unique

way that, in these halls, each sound seems to take flight and circulate in splendid and brilliant choreography, a taste for the vineyard configuration has become established in Japan and around the world.

Among Nagata Acoustics most recent projects, the 2003 opening of Walt Disney Concert Hall of course represents another successful vineyard configuration concert hall project. In addition, our projects in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Hamburg, Paris (for Radio France) and Shenzhen are all large-scale concert halls being designed with vineyard configurations.

2. Suntory Hall took the lead in Japan in creating variety-filled concert programming and artistically scripted, stimulating productions.

A hall's character and classiness is most tellingly revealed in the concerts and programs that the hall sponsors and produces. Suntory Hall welcomes the world's leading orchestras, ensembles and soloists all year long. For me, the pinnacle event is the annual black-tie gala concert held each October in celebration of the hall's anniversary. This year, for the 20th anniversary, the gala concert featured "The Three Great Tenors" Neil Shicoff, Giuseppe Sabbatini and Vincenzo La Scola, giving the gala concert an unusually strong opera focus. Suntory Hall already has an established and well-known annual "hall opera" production, separate from the gala concert. For my individual taste, I equally enjoyed the gala concerts of past years that combined classical music performances with the wit of Tetsuko Kuroyanagi as mistress of ceremonies and a sampling of traditional Japanese dance forms, ballet performances and cameo appearances of other traditional performing arts genres. For many of the opera fans who attend the Suntory Hall gala concert, I suspect that this year's gala concert was especially satisfying.

Another Suntory Hall program I especially enjoy is the Small Hall's "Saturday Salon," held on a handful of Saturday afternoons each year. This year's "Saturday Salon" brought Prof. Tatsuo Minagawa (Rikkyo University Professor Emeritus) to the Small Hall for talks by the professor on his encyclopedic knowledge of classical music and European culture. The program included both a sophisticated lecture and a chamber concert, with the luxury of sipping wine during the intermission, transporting me away from the world outside to enjoy the moment of a truly refined and stimulating Saturday afternoon.

3. Suntory Hall set new standards of customer service for concert patrons.

Nowadays, Japanese concert hall goers assume that a concert hall has a reception desk where they can ask questions and get assistance. This approach to interacting with concert patrons started when Suntory Hall opened and Mr. Saji recognized the need to put in place a high standard of customer service. With the opening of Suntory Hall, the roles of usher, cloak attendant and other customer facing hall personnel became trained hall employee positions instead of part-time workers hired temporarily for each concert or event. Today's hall personnel provide courteous and knowledgeable customer service to assist patrons with everything from unanticipated minor (and not-so-minor) emergencies to answering questions about the artists and the concert program.

Another customer service change that Suntory Hall pioneered in Japan was to offer varied and delicious refreshments before concerts and during intermissions. Suntory Hall was the first concert hall in Japan to add beer, wine

and champagne to the menu of soft drinks, coffee and tea served at publicly funded concert halls. Moreover, the customer service extended by the wait staff of the hall set new standards of hospitality for concert hall refreshment services. I give high marks to Suntory Hall for the way it treats concert hall patrons and its high level of customer service.

In the above paragraphs I reviewed three pillars of success that Suntory Hall has given to Japan's classical music community. These three pillars are the acoustical design plans for the hall, hall-sponsored programming and a high standard of customer service to concert patrons. As the world of classical music continues to evolve, I look forward to watching Suntory Hall continue to be a trendsetter and a leader in excellent concert hall management.