



Connecting to Bach

Malcolm Bruno talks to renowned Japanese Bach interpreter Masaaki Suzuki

Like the plays of Shakespeare, the music of J S Bach reaches across the globe, across the barriers of language, culture, taste and tradition. Unlike literature or the very historical focus of western painting, European art music – especially early music – is at once formalistic in style and immediate in its appeal to a novice ear. Not surprising though unanticipated, then, that one of the most prominent Bach interpreters to emerge over the past decade – attracting the attention of enthusiasts from widely diverse backgrounds – is Masaaki Suzuki.

Since the early 1990s his Bach Collegium Japan has moved into prominence in a crowded marketplace with the mammoth ambition of a complete cycle in concert and on disc of the cantatas and Passions. But

not just in Tokyo: meeting the maestro and his wife at St John's, Smith Square, this past November on the day of his London debut, it seems impossible that this recent tour with the Academy of Ancient Music marks his first appearance in the British Isles as performer. Such is the esteem and omnipresence of his BIS recordings, one feels there must already have been a Prom that slipped by!

No relation to the great violin pedagogue Shin'ichi Suzuki, Masaaki was born in Kobe in 1954, in the milieu of post-war Japan, to parents sympathetic to a traditional eastern culture rapidly opening its eyes westward. 'I can remember my father playing Chopin mazurkas,' Suzuki explains. 'This very European music was a part of my heritage as a child. And by the time I was 12 I had begun

weekly organ playing in a small village church outside Kobe.' He adds with a grin, 'It wasn't actually an organ, but a harmonium, on which it was not possible to play Bach!'

For a westerner – where the advent of world music is a recent phenomenon – the towering question one wants immediately to ask is: how could a Far Eastern culture so previously divorced from the west become so addicted, as it apparently has, to such a peculiarly unique phenomenon as European art music? My curiosity is clearly nothing new to Suzuki. 'From 1638 to 1868 Japan was officially closed to the west. Only the Netherlands had any contact. Just before the 20th century – about 1890 – that was to change with the creation of a music school at the National University in Tokyo. Bach, Lully, even Albrechtsberger were all introduced then! And after World War II there was a huge explosion of interest in all aspects of western culture including, and perhaps especially, music.'

After school, Suzuki went on to Tokyo to study composition with Akio Yashiro at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where he wrote orchestral and chamber works and songs. For two further years he continued in Tokyo, taking post-graduate organ studies with Tsuguo Hirono. 'I had had an interest in Bach since my childhood in the early Sixties. In those days the precious vinyl discs were not cheap in Japan, but my parents had a copy of Karl Richter's B minor Mass. Of course it was Bach in the old romantic, Wagnerian Germanic style, but I loved it, and Richter like Rilling had a valid connection to Bach. I listened to it over and over again every night – maybe a thousand times! And by the late Seventies my interest in the organ and Bach would mean that I had to go to Europe. The Netherlands, with the long connection to Japan and with Ton Koopman, was a natural destination.'

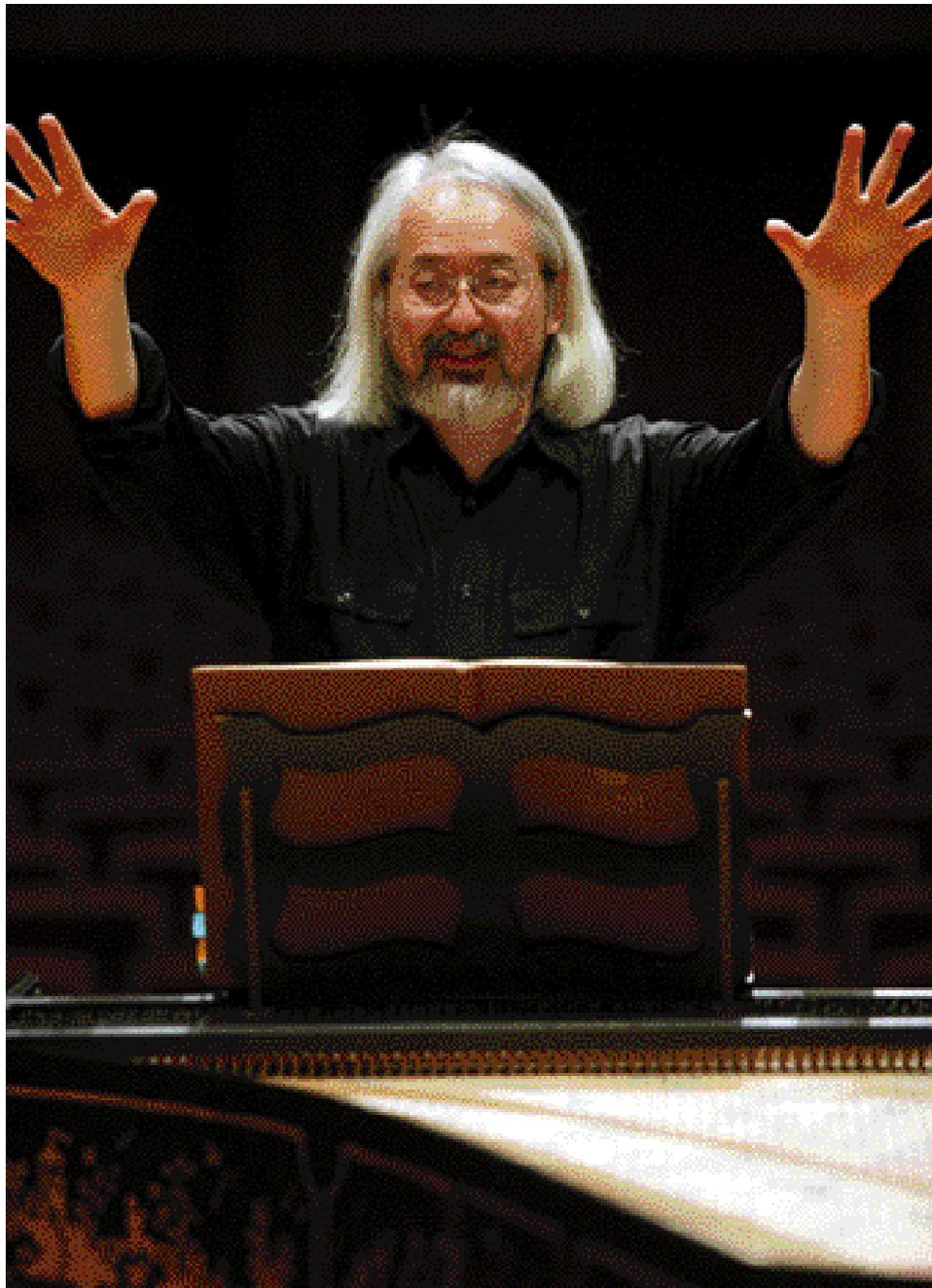
Between 1978 and 1983 Suzuki studied with Ton Koopman and Piet Kee – and improvisation with Klaas Bolt at the Sweelinck Conservatory. Meanwhile, he won prizes in performance and improvisation in the Flanders Early Music Festival, while teaching harpsichord at the Hochschule für Musik, over the German border in Duisburg.

When he returned to Japan in 1983 he would begin to flex the muscles of his new-found virtuosity as an organist and a devotee of the music of Bach on the fairly virgin soil of his homeland. 'Japanese music has been passionately dominated by western tradition for at least two generations now. Bruggen and the other Dutch/Flemish specialists arrived in Japan about the same time their influence was first felt in England and on the Continent. But in the case of Bach, especially, it is more than just performance practice at issue for a non-western audience. This is music composed for the Christian church, by a

devout believer, and it is impossible to perform the Passions and cantatas if you don't understand the significance and purpose of the text as Bach set it.

'Unlike Korea, which is now 50 per cent Christian, Japan's church population is only 1 per cent. It's not essential to be Christian to understand Bach,' he continues, 'but in my case it has been an important motivation. Players as well as singers need to know what the text means, not just how the German should sound phonetically. And as my musicians know very little about the Bible or the words of Christ, I have to explain everything carefully. The tenor aria 'Schlage doch, schlage' for example has a very difficult pizzicato accompaniment. When I told the orchestra about the Last Judgement, trying to give them some sense of the





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angst of the last moment of a person's life, and the towering sense of judgement in Bach's Lutheran Germany, they were able to find a new vigour to put into the music.'

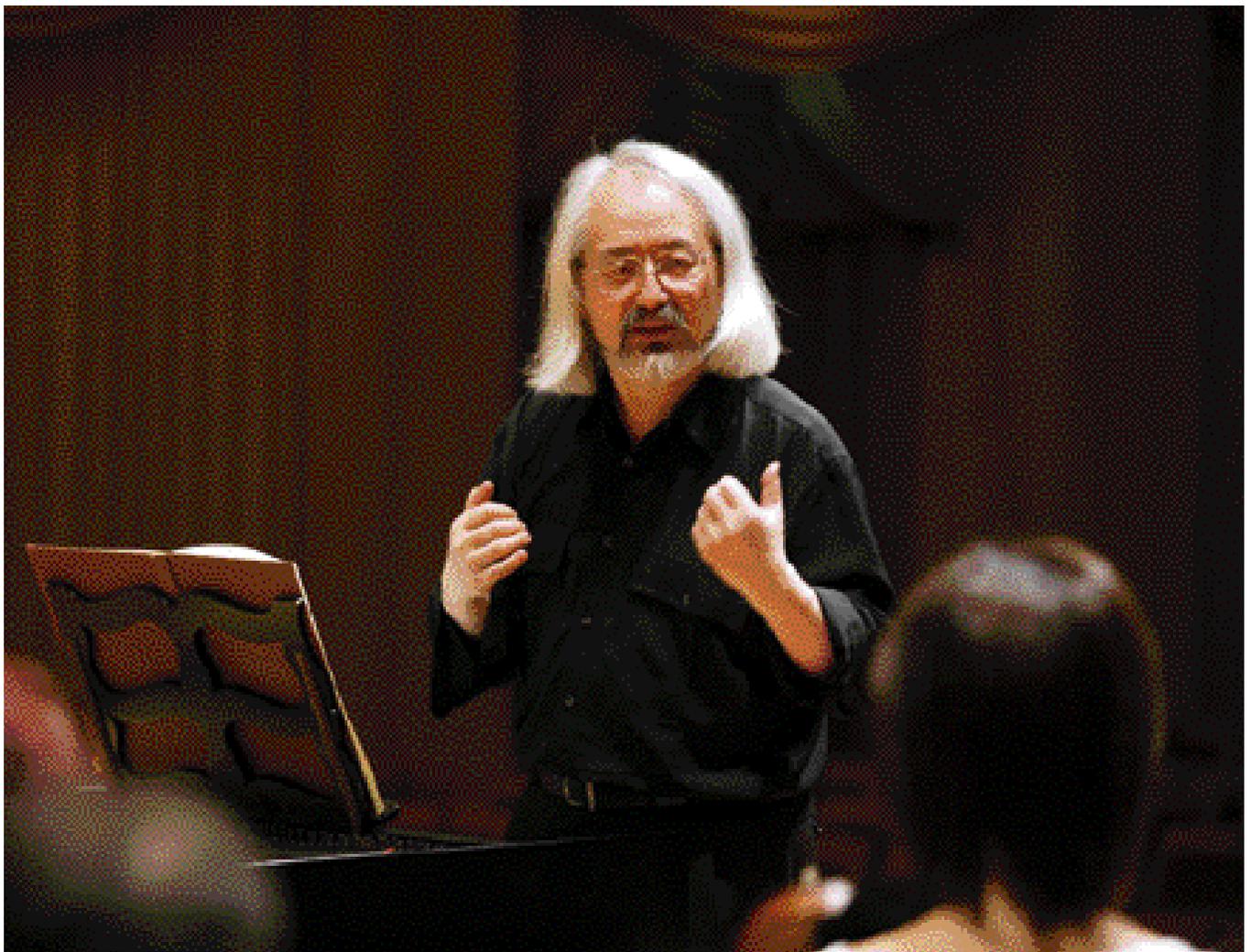
As I hear Suzuki speak I realise how different his Japanese world is to ours in the west. In Europe Christianity is largely a part of the fabric of our cultural-historical identity, no longer perhaps at the centre of our lives, but an inherited given. The Gospels for many are like Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, something we know about by osmosis rather than direct experience. But for Suzuki's

performers – except for the few westerners integrated in his Bach Collegium – it is uncharted territory, for which Suzuki's own knowledge, interest in theology and faith are exemplar. Through him his colleagues discover for the first time not only the music in conditions approaching instrumental and vocal standards of Bach's time, but also the ideas motivating the great master in the first place.

'1990,' continues Suzuki, 'offered an important opportunity after half a dozen years of my enterprise in Japan: there was a new concert hall in Osaka. I was assistant professor at the Shoin Women's University in Kobe, and I knew this would be time to launch a Bach Collegium Japan with period instruments, integrating Japanese singers and players with their best counterparts from the west. My brother Hidemi is a cellist with La Petite Bande, and he was able to provide me with sufficient colleagues of his to get started. By 1992 we had a regular concert series and by 1995 the recording project with BIS began.' It wasn't a dramatic beginning – sales were slow, but with commitment both on Suzuki's and BIS's account the partnership has blossomed.

In these days of highly commercialised classical music recording by the major labels, such longevity seems inconceivable. But the chemistry was right. The Swede Robert von Bahr, owner and founder of BIS, was a huge devotee of Japanese culture while Suzuki was fully immersed in European religion and music, and baroque music in particular. The infrastructure at Shoin is ideal to foster this kind of long-term relationship: the duration of a typical project is the best part of a month with rehearsals, concerts and then recording. Unlike the enslaving schedules of professional music-making in Europe, Suzuki's musicians have time to live with the music and with the interpretation that emerges from the rehearsals and performances of each project: more like chamber music with friends than a rushed orchestral gig. BIS's commitment to the project is expressed in the permanent rig von Bahr has installed in the chapel at Kobe University where all the recordings are made.

Pondering the organic beauty of Suzuki's Bach that has attracted so many listeners, it seems as if I'm talking to a Japanese Schweitzer, and I press on to the inevitable issues of performance practice. 'I'm not a musicologist,' he begins, which I immediately realise means only that he is not an academic musicologist. 'I am deeply interested in the integrity of practical reason. I want not only to reproduce what Bach might have done, but experience cantatas as a nourishment to our human condition. That is why I translate all the German into Japanese myself.'



But what of the sticky performance issues in which his old mentor Ton Koopman has recently become so embroiled? 'I have been very interested to follow the Parrott/Rifkin debate with Koopman. While I prefer more than single voices for colour, I follow the idea of the *concertisti/ripienisti* with enthusiasm. It therefore makes no sense emotionally with Bach's text – from a perfectly compositional point of view, putting aside the historical record – for soloists to be cut off from a choir, like a 19th-century oratorio. In the Passions, for example, Christ must also sing with the crowd!'

Seeing how far Suzuki's motivation and achievement have taken him, the Schweitzer analogy may not be so far-fetched. His performances radiate a sensitivity and musical preparation, in the words of the critic Jonathan Freeman-Atwood, 'an intensity born of subtle contrast in vocal and instrumental articulation, underpinned by an uncanny ability to choose a tempo that provides for lyrical intimacy and organic gesture.' His faith and artistic approach together radiate the convincing musicianship that crosses boundaries of history and heritage: an authenticity not vested merely in tradition, but, as he discovers them, in the power of the music and their texts. □

