

Japanese People Contributing Worldwide

Speaking to the World with Music

Internationally active conductor Tomomi Nishimoto studied classical music from an early age under the influence of her mother, a music school graduate. Growing up close to the music world, she knew firsthand how tough it was to become a professional, but when she was in high school, she decided to pursue a musical career.

One day, she went hiking in the mountains among the fresh greenery of early summer. “The light and shadows and the interwoven patterns of the trees were so beautiful, they moved me to tears. I felt then that no artificial beauty could compete with that of nature. I wished I could put what I saw into a picture, but I didn’t have that sort of talent. Then it occurred to me that I’d like to express the scene through music.”

After studying composition at a Japanese music school, she traveled to Russia, where she studied under Ilya Musin. “He gave passionate instruction without regard to nationality, gender, or age. I wasn’t able to speak Russian when I arrived there, but he taught me: ‘Don’t think of it as a negative. Acquire a power of expression that can communicate without using words.’ And he encouraged me to apply the strengths I’d gained from studying composition.” Nishimoto mastered her mentor’s lessons brilliantly. After performing mainly in Europe with various symphony orchestras and at opera houses, in 2010–11 she became the first foreign principal guest conductor of the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia.

There are still few Asian or female conductors in the classical music world. But that has not stopped Nishimoto. In 2012, she formed the IlluminArt, a group with no home base that changes its format to match the venue and program, and became its artistic director and principal conductor. Nationality, race, religion, gender, and age are not criteria for membership in the group. “The important factors are appeal, talent, and capability,” she explains.

Nishimoto does not remain within the bounds of classical music; she also conducts in performances of new types, such as collaborative work with video creators. She has also become involved in various presentations of Japanese culture. When directing the opera *Madame Butterfly* in Japan, she incorporated kabuki staging, *maiko* (apprentice geisha) performers, and folk art elements. Outside Japan, she has won critical acclaim for efforts to adapt concerts to the areas where they are held, such as by adding local folk instruments to the orchestra.

In November 2013, IlluminArt became the first Asian group to be invited to the International Festival of Sacred Music and Art in Rome. It won great applause for its performance of *orasbo* (from the Latin *oratio*, “prayer”), Christian chants from Ikitsukijima Island in Nagasaki Prefecture. It was something of a homecoming for this music, which derives from Gregorian chant transmitted to Japan by Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century and passed down orally from generation to generation by “hidden” Christians on the island after their faith was banned. At the same time, it was so old it had not previously been heard in the Vatican. The orchestra was invited back in 2014, and Nishimoto’s skill and achievement in researching and reconstructing *orasbo* were recognized as she became the first Asian and the youngest winner of an honorary award given by the organizers of the festival.

Nishimoto says that one role art must play is to display things of excellence from various angles. She declares, “I want to continue to express the wonders of Japan through the shared language of music.” The curtain will never fall on Nishimoto’s dreams.



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1. Tomomi Nishimoto conducts. “Simply wielding a baton is not enough; a conductor must show the direction for the performance. It is wonderful to pull everyone’s ideals into a whole.” (Photo by Hideki Shiozawa) 2. Nishimoto’s IlluminArt Philharmonic performs liturgical music for Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome during the 2014 International Festival of Sacred Music and Art. It is invited to perform *orasbo* again this year. “It is an honor to be responsible for providing the music that is a key element of the Mass,” says Nishimoto. 3. *Maiko* walk along the *hanamichi* platform between spectators at the Nishimoto-directed performance of the opera *Madame Butterfly*. Audiences enjoyed the use of a distinctive kabuki stage for the performance rather than a concert hall. (©Shochiku)



Tomomi Nishimoto

Artistic director and chief conductor of IlluminArt Philharmonic Orchestra. The first foreigner to hold conducting posts in Russia, she has performed in around 20 countries as a conductor. In 2014, she became the first Asian to be invited twice to the International Festival of Sacred Music and Art in Rome and the youngest winner of an honorary award from the organizers in recognition of her talent and artistic skill. She will appear for the third time at the festival in 2015. Nishimoto was selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2007, and she completed Harvard Kennedy School’s executive education program in public leadership as a fully funded fellow in 2012. Official website: <http://www.tomomi-n.com/>



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