



OIDEYASU!

CAFÉ MUSIC

Kokoro no Eiyō: Nourishment for the Soul

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Imagine stepping into a cozy living room, closing the door and being swept away in a whirlwind of classical music ensembles of violins, pianos and other orchestral instruments, pulsating your soul and vibrating the walls of your upper torso. You are immediately transported to another world. You glide towards the table in the corner beside the sun-filled window and settle into the wooden chair, curved for extra comfort, with a sturdy armrest so that one can sit for hours at a time and allow the stress and fatigue of the day to seep out from your fingers and toes. The masterpieces of composers such as Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms renew, recharge and rejuvenate the body and soul. Neatly shelved side by side along the walls near the record player are rows of more than five hundred LPs and over two thousand CDs.

It is just about lunchtime and the aroma of the menu, which changes daily, entices your hungry palate.

Café Music is a haven situated away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in Kyōto. The small living room-style café seats about fifteen people and is attached to the home of owners Setsuo and Michiko Watanabe. Setsuo, who is 63, has always loved all types of music, from classical to jazz to pop to modern. But he has a special affinity for classical music. As a young child, he remembers hearing classical music blaring from a loudspeaker at the annual sports day festival. Setsuo laughed nostalgically, explaining, "It was called 'The March Song,' and I remember thinking how beautiful the different instruments sounded."

As an adult, one of his first jobs was working for the Ōsaka Izumi Concert Hall, where he was responsible for taking care of the musicians, mostly Westerners who had been invited to perform in Japan. The job involved music, something he truly loved, but the reality of selling tickets and promoting music for the highest profit was disillusioning. Setsuo's true dream was simply to share the wonderment and joy of music with as many people as possible, without having to think about huge profits or economic gains. He wanted to have a small gathering place where people came together through their love of music. That's when he and his wife Michiko decided to open the Music Café in 1986.

From the very moment the café was conceived of, Setsuo was adamant about one thing. Michiko, who is 60, smiled as she explained her husband's resolve back then, "When we decided to open our café, Setsuo insisted that the chairs shouldn't be any ordinary chairs, but had to be especially comfortable. He said that listening to classical music isn't just a quick few-minutes experience. It takes a long time to listen to a whole piece. He really searched for that right chair. So these chairs that we are sitting in are the same chairs that we invested in back then, more than twenty years ago. My husband insisted that the customers should feel like they are sitting in a

cozy living room." I nodded my head in appreciation. From my first visit, I had noticed how the wooden chairs with their broad armrests embraced my form as if they were made for me.

Michiko smiled, confessing she caught the classical music "bug" after marrying Setsuo more than thirty-six years ago.

"In the beginning, I didn't really understand it. My husband would try to explain and I listened, but that was about it. Then one day, it happened. I remember it so clearly. I was listening to Brahms' Symphony No. 1. All of a sudden, in the middle of the piece, my heart fluttered. It began pounding and I got chicken-skin throughout my body. It was beautiful, more than I ever imag-



Michiko and Setsuo Watanabe's Café Music is a haven amidst the hustle and bustle of Kyōto's everyday life. (Photo by Jackie J. Kim)

ined. It was emotional. It was as if the music had the power to shake my heart, and the heart of the composer was communicated to me."

Michiko's eyes glazed with tears as she tried to temper her emotions. Slowly, she continued, "Music for me is life support (*ikiru-sasae*). It supports me. Even if there is sadness or hardships in life, when I listen to music like this, it erases everything and I can simply forget."

Setsuo says it's hard to say who his favorite musician is, but if he had to choose one, it would have to be Mozart. "Beethoven expresses sadness, joy and hardness without a sense of doubt. The emotions are clear. But what I appreciate about Mozart is that the emotions that he expresses are much more subtle; it is not exaggerated. His melodies are a mixture of happiness and sadness."

He paused for a moment. "For me, music is proof that I am alive. If there were no music, there would be no life. Music is like life itself. Through sadness and happiness, there is togetherness. Where there is sadness, there is happiness; where there is happiness, there is sadness. That's what I hear in Mozart. Through this, I could hear the human heart. In sadness, there is still a desire to seek happiness, and in happiness, it is human to wonder how long this happiness will last."

He said music cafés used to be quite popular before—there were more than ten in Kyōto alone. But with Japan's economic downturn, the cafés have become a rarity. Although business is slow, Setsuo and Michiko enjoy their every day, listening to music and building friendships with

regular customers through their love of music.

I visit the café once or twice a week. It is my getaway from the daily hustle and bustle. Up until the moment I reach the door, I am always thinking about all the things I need to do. But as soon as I step inside and am greeted by the booming music and the Watanabes' warm smiles, I leave that burden at the door. I sit at my favorite table near the window and simply say, "Lunch, please." A few minutes later, a warm, freshly cooked meal is placed in front of me with items such as fried shrimp and fish, lettuce and cabbage salad, pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*), a hot bowl of rice and warm miso soup. One of my favorites is Japanese-style *Hanbāga*—a

steaming-hot fresh hamburger patty garnished with grated *daikon* (radish) and a shredded green *shiso* leaf on top, served with a salad, pickled vegetables, rice and soup for a mere six dollars. Dining while listening to the sometimes soft and melodic strings of a violin; or the quick, dancing fingers of a pianist in a trance or the powerful echo of the orchestra, my emotions are teased like grass by soft dew at dawn or overwhelmed like a shore by pounding tidal waves.

I have always liked and appreciated classical music. But one day, out of the blue, it happened. I was biting into a warm, moist piece of fried pork while looking out at the sunny day. Setsuo was rushing back and forth between the kitchen and the café with Michiko's freshly brewed coffee. He then went over to the record player and put on an LP, informing me and another guest that it was the second intermezzo from "The Treasure of Madonna." As I slowly chewed my food, I was swept up in the tantalizing melody and, for a moment, I had to close my eyes. It was an automatic reaction. I felt like I was being lifted and was floating ever so freely. There were no boundaries, no barriers. I felt like I was gliding gracefully, like the most seasoned ice skater, flying freely across the ice, jumping and twirling as if it was the easiest thing in the world to do. Suddenly, I felt a tear rolling down my right cheek—I don't know why, because I wasn't sad. It was an emotion that I couldn't explain. It was as if I had seen a small, colorful butterfly land gently on a flower, or the hushed first snow of winter fall. I quickly brushed away my tears, embarrassed that someone might see me. Then I heard the snuffle of the customer behind me. I smiled. I guess I wasn't the only one who had been moved to tears by the music. ■■

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by emailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.