

In the land of the trembling earth

Believe it or not, end of December, after 18 (!) years, I once again walked on Japanese soil.

Admittedly, I had great concerns when, half a year ago, I received the Vienna Volksoper symphony orchestra's enquiry about my participation in a tour of Japan. The nuclear incidents at the nuclear power plant of Fukushima were still too current in summer, and so it took me a while to make up my mind and accept their invitation.



The “ingredients” of this tour: the conductor on this journey was Ola RUDNER, along with tenor Mehrzad MONTAZERI and the soprano Andrea ROST, visually dressed up by two ballet couples.



Initially, we were 6 days in Tokyo where the first 4 concerts took place in the Suntory Hall (pleasantly, our hotel was situated directly next to the concert hall, and so it took us only 5 minutes to get to the stage – luxury!)

The Suntory Hall ranks among the world's most renowned concert halls. It was opened in October 1986, and was then Tokyo's first concert house exclusively used for these purposes. The main hall accommodates 2,600 seats, a stage of 250 sq m, and an organ built by the Austrian company Rieger Orgelbau. But this is not the only Austrian aspect to this concert hall: the square in front of the Suntory Hall is called “Herbert von Karajan plaza”!

During the New Year's concert, an incident occurred which I (and the orchestra) will surely never forget:

The “Tales from the Vienna Woods” were being played, it was the point of my solo, and I began to play the first bars when, suddenly, an odd sound was audible, as if a strong wind had blown through the hall. I was thinking, well, maybe this is an interlude offered by the auditorium technology ... but I could not see anything! When shortly after a murmur went through the crowd, there was no time to think about what THIS could mean, for a moment later everything started to shake. There was an earthquake!!! (As I learned afterwards, the epicentre was about 400 km south of Tokyo, but it was also VERY distinctly perceptible in the hall!). My first reaction was a glance into the audience. My thinking was the following: the



Japanese are accustomed to earthquakes, so they could better judge the situation than us! And since the audience hadn't hastily fled the hall, I continued to play – without interruption, without any mistakes ... subsequent to the concert, I was that night's hero. Had I stopped playing, it could have caused panic, the hall might have had to be evacuated ... but since I continued playing, the concert went on!

Still in Tokyo, I was allowed the pleasure of a live radio interview!

The last concert of the tour was being plugged in the live radio show. Originally, a member of the orchestra should have given the interview, but unfortunately there was a time overlap with the orchestra's CD recording. Since I didn't have to attend these recordings, I had been asked to speak on the radio. With the interpreter by my side, this task was also well accomplished.



After another concert in Yokohama we left Tokyo and travelled to Nagano using the Shinkansen express. With this high-speed train (reaching speeds of up to 300 km/h!) it took us less than 1.5 hours to get from Tokyo to Nagano.

By the way, in Nagano I saw this winter's first snow!

After our arrival, we had the rest of the day at our disposal, and the time was immediately used for visiting the famous Zenko-ji temple, one of the most visited temples in Japan. Inside the temple, there is a Buddha statue (legend has it that this was the first to exist in Japan) which is exhibited to the general public only every 7 years (and then, only a copy of it; the original statue remains well-protected).



Underneath the main hall, there is a pitch-black corridor which can be crossed by visitors. There, a key ("the key to paradise") hangs from the ceiling, and touching it serves the respective person's enlightenment. Certainly, we could not neglect the opportunity to do this walk into darkness, and so were wandering about in this ice-cold corridor for several minutes, feeling our way along the wall. We never found a key, or rather, we hadn't even known of its existence. I picked up this information only afterwards! But by all means, this operation was exciting! Since we also had to take off our shoes, we were frozen afterwards and – in my case anyway – only a hot bath

could re-awaken my spirits. It is also worth mentioning that this was the first temple granting access to women, whilst they were still being banned from others.

After Nagano we went to Osaka, and finally to Nagoya. Unfortunately, these last days of the voyage did not provide for much sightseeing, since they were densely packed with journeys, concerts and onward journeys ...



Way too quickly the tour was over again.

What I will miss most about Japan?

The friendly people, the cleanliness everywhere and, of course, ... the good FOOD!!!!