

Michiko Otaki NEWSLETTER

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Fall, 2004

We are sorry not to have been able to send out in 2003 what has turned out since 1993 to be an annual newsletter for Michiko Otaki. We hope what follows explains why and will bring you up to date on her recent activities.



BECAUSE OF EXTENSIVE CHANGES within the Music Department faculty (twelve members over the last few years) at Clayton College & State University (better known as Clayton State or CCSU) where Michiko teaches, and with her now being the senior faculty member after only ten years in the department, there was simply no time for her to even think about furnishing us with enough information to put together her newsletter this past year. She laments: “Unfortunately, I’ve had to spend much more time chairing search committees and interviewing potential music department candidates than I was able to spend at the piano. I just hope it hasn’t shown in my playing. My administrative work in academia has been an invaluable experience; I only hope the diversion didn’t have any

negative effect on my musical development.”

Apparently not, since Michiko’s tours this past season again with the **KODÁLY STRING QUARTET** performing the highly demanding Dohnányi Piano Quintet and later in the winter with the **PILSEN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA** playing the Chopin E-minor Piano Concerto—two major Romantic works—were at her usual high artistic standard. Michiko, however, would welcome the chance to perform the Chopin again now under less stressful circumstances, and not in the middle of a very busy and full semester’s teaching schedule.

UNUSUALLY YOUNG BUT A NEVERTHELESS ENTHUSIASTIC AUDIENCE

ONE VERY INTERESTING SIDELIGHT of her tour

with the Pilsen orchestra took place while the orchestra and Michiko were in Savannah, Georgia, for a performance at the historic Lucas Theatre. The incident took full advantage of Michiko’s now well-honed skills in communicating with music students when Ken Carter, director of the Lucas, asked if she could do a short lecture/ demonstration for some students at Gadsden Elementary School with one of the



**“What was the question?”
Michiko interacts
with the children**

musicians from the orchestra. Michiko and concertmaster Jiří Žilák were rather apprehensive when they arrived at the school and discovered that their first encounter with students there would be with kids from kindergarten through second grade. Their fears were alleviated when Michiko asked how many of the children played a musical instrument and about 90 percent of them raised their hands. This was especially surprising to the concertmaster since not only was this school



in what appeared to be a less than affluent neighborhood but nearly all of the students were African-American. Coming from the Czech Republic where the demographics are very different, this

“I hope they will retain their enthusiasm for the arts and intellectual curiosity.”

was quite different from the stereotype Mr. Žilák had in mind. Michiko also comments that when the workshop got to the question and answer part, “many of them asked questions which were just as intelligent—if not more so—as the university students with whom I’m usually working! I had to wonder just how they knew to ask these poignant questions. The experience was very rewarding and the audience seemed very appreciative. I treasure the memory of this workshop, and often think about it even now. It fills my heart with



Michiko and Mr. Žilák delight a very young audience



Rehearsing Chopin with Maestro Jiří Malát



“What a lovely instrument!”
Michiko checks out the Petrof
before the recording

warmth. I truly wish all the best for all these children and hope that they will retain their enthusiasm for the arts and intellectual curiosity.”

WITH A STUDENT AND A COLLEAGUE ON THE HOMEFRONT

IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, Michiko had an unexpected and unusual opportunity to tour with her exceptionally talented student, Elena Cholakova from Bulgaria. When the José White String Quartet could not make the opening engagements of their tour because of the delay of the special visa/security clearance presently needed for anyone born in Cuba, Michiko stepped in to help us by offering to play some piano duet compositions with Elena. “Elena had been studying with me for over a year by then, and Elena and I played duets together on several occasions during that time, so it was easy for us to come up with a program on very short notice—36 hours to be exact!” Michiko laughs. “We brushed up the works we already knew, Elena polished up a couple of her solo pieces, and off we went down to Florida to our first concert. Elena is young and has enormous potential.



Last minute fine-tuning: Michiko and the BCS
during the Mozart recording session

People everywhere were delighted to ‘discover’ her. Clayton State and I are very fortunate to have her as a student, and I know someday we will have a bright new star we can all be proud of.”

While we are on the topic of Clayton State, some of you know that Michiko had worked closely with one of her colleagues in the Music Department, soprano Cheryl Boyd-Waddell, since Michiko’s arrival there in 1994. Tragically, that partnership came to an untimely end when Dr. Boyd-Waddell became gravely ill and passed away in the spring of 2002. “It was a very difficult time not just for me but all of us in the Department,” Michiko recalls. “However, life must go on, and I am fortunate enough to have a new, very fine partner in the Music Department, tenor Kurt-Alexander Zeller, who replaced Cheryl as the Director of Vocal Activities. Kurt is one of the finest voice teachers I have ever known, and is an incredibly knowledgeable musician. I am learning a lot from him through our partnership!” Dr. Zeller and Michiko will be performing two concerts at Clayton State’s beautiful Spivey Hall this year, one on October 8th, and another one on December 2.

ENTER BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS, THE NEWEST COLLABORATORS

A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN MICHIKO’S working relationships with outstanding international musicians came about when she was contacted by cellist Jan Škrdlík, asking if she would be interested in collaborating with a new chamber orchestra with which he had become involved in a major way, the **BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS**. Michiko has known Jan since her performances about a decade ago with the Wallinger String Quartet because Jan is the cellist in that quartet. Jan invited Michiko to perform with the BCS at the Janáček Festival in Luhačovice (where Janáček had spent his summers for more than



A good recording engineer makes all
the difference in the world: Michiko
with Mr. Stráňavský

20 years near the end of his life and where he met the young lady who inspired his string quartet, *Intimate Letters*) on July 31st.

This concert was also recorded by Czech Radio for broadcast later this year.

“I was told by several people what a lovely little town this Luhačovice was, but I really did not get to see anything except the theater where we played!” Michiko sighed. The Czech Republic experienced one of the hottest days



BCS Director Mr. Besperát poses
with Michiko during the break from
the recording in the Convent

of this summer the day the **BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS** and Michiko performed at the Festival. The orchestra went from Brno to Luhačovice in four separate cars. Michiko got there just fine traveling with Jan, who was the co-soloist that evening. One of the four cars was not so lucky. It overheated just on the outskirts of Brno, and the poor musicians had to hitchhike. Very fortunately for them (even though they probably did not feel that way at the time!), a musician whom they knew was on his way to a town not too far from Luhačovice, and was able to drive the musicians to a place close enough to the concert site so that they could be picked up by the director, Jiří Besperát. Those musicians only arrived at the theater about half an hour prior to the concert and were understandably frazzled, but all turned out well at the end. But in the meantime, because the musi-



A happy ending to a strenuous day: Michiko and co-soloist Jan Škrdlík pose after a successful Festival appearance

cians who were already at the theater had to stay nearby so that they could start rehearsing/sound-checking for the recording the moment the unlucky passengers of the ill-fated car arrived, Michiko had no time to go out and explore the area. “Well, it is the musician’s life, I guess,” Michiko takes a philosophical view. “It is very common that I—or any touring musicians—only see the hotel and the hall. I have to add this

little town to my list of ‘places to really visit someday!’”

In the meantime, after hearing recordings of the **BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS** and having Michiko’s feedback about the high quality of this ensemble, our management made the decision to tour the BCS with Michiko in the U.S. in the fall of the 2005-06 season and there are already two weeks spoken for in the upper Midwest. With that in mind, a recording of Michiko and the BCS was also made while she was there of the Mozart F-major Concerto, K. 413. As you may be aware, of the four piano concerti by Mozart which can be played with or without winds (K. 413, 414, 415, and 449), Michiko had already recorded three concerti. The Piano Concerto in F major, which Michiko performed on her last tour with another string orchestra from the Czech Republic in 2002, completes the set of recordings for this group of concerti. “Actually, I am glad that I saved the F major to the end,” Michiko says. “The F major is deceptively difficult. It is so easy to play the notes—sight-readable to most intermediate piano students. Unlike the more sophisticated compositions, like the more popular A major (K. 414), where the concerto is so strong that if you play it reasonably well it sounds good, the F major really challenges you in a way that if you just play the notes, you could sound



All set to go: Michiko, Jan, and the Brno Chamber Soloists celebrate the beginning of their new collaboration

“The natural, spontaneous musical flow, and the warmest of tone. There is nothing forced or artificial about their playing, and yet, at the same time, it is refined and polished.”

rather silly. I guess that is partly why it is not played or recorded very often. It is indeed a beautiful and charming piece of music, but it took me a while to feel confident and comfortable enough to try to record this piece.”

The recording was made in the beautiful *Konvent Milosrdnych Bratri* in Brno. “Recording sessions have never been my favorite things,” Michiko says. “I prefer a concert where I can see real people listening. Playing for a few microphones is not much fun, as is the focus one has to maintain in order to be musical and play with as few mistakes as possible!” It turned out that Michiko actually came away feeling rather happy after this recording. “I really liked the recording engineer and director, Mr. Stráňavský. I understand he was a professional violinist himself, and I could tell that he not only was very knowledgeable in music and performance, but also knew the musicians’ side very well. He made me feel very comfortable, and was successful in keeping the music flowing, which is sometimes hard to do in a dry recording session. The **BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS** and I feel that the recording turned out quite well, and I hope the listeners agree!”

Another concern Michiko had was about the piano she would have for the recording. Here again, Michiko got very lucky. Apparently, the convent is the home of the Brno Philharmonic Choir, and the Choir acquired a brand new Petrof less than a month before Michiko’s recording. “It was by far the best piano I have played in the Czech Republic so far,” Michiko reports ecstatically. “The action and voicing were very fine, it was easy to control, and the tone was just lovely. I know Jan spent a lot of time searching for a good

ROGER CHASE with MICHIKO OTAKI
USA Tour, January, 2005

<u>DATE/TIME</u>	<u>CITY</u>	<u>PRESENTER/VENUE</u>
<u>JANUARY</u>		
6 8:00 pm	BOCA RATON, FL	Century Village Theater
7 8:00 pm	WEST PALM BEACH, FL	Century Village Theater
8 7:30 pm	TAMPA, FL [<i>Tarpon Springs</i>]	Tarpon Springs Performing Arts Center/324 Pine Street
<u>9</u> 8:00 pm	DEERFIELD BEACH, FL	Century Village Theater
10 8:00 pm	PEMBROKE PINES, FL	Century Village Theater
11 8:00 pm	LAKE CITY, FL	First Presbyterian Church/697 SW. Baya Drive
12		
13 7:30 pm	AMERICUS, GA	Georgia Southwestern State University/Fine Arts Theater
14 7:30 pm	DEMOREST, GA	Piedmont College/Chapel
15		
<u>16</u>		
17 8:00 pm	GREENVILLE, SC	Chamber Music Association/TBA
18 8:00 pm	NASHVILLE, TN	Trevecca Nazarene University/Waggoner Library Rotunda

NOTE: Sundays are **underlined**.

concert at Spivey Hall takes place on Wednesday, April 6th, 2005, at 7:30 pm.

Another interesting performance activity of Michiko during this upcoming season will be a short tour of the southeastern U.S. with the world-renowned violist **ROGER CHASE** from London. Roger is perhaps best known as violist in the Nash Ensemble for over 20 years; he also made several tours to the U.S. with the Esterhazy Baryton Trio, when Michiko

piano for me to record on. I must say I am impressed with Jan that he found this one, and was able to negotiate so that we could rent it reasonably." The CD, which also includes recordings of a cello concerto by Johann Christian Bach (Jan Škrdlík as the soloist), Janáček's *Suite for Strings*, and Štědroň's *Banalissimo*, which was written exclusively for this ensemble, will be available later this fall.

The Czech Republic is known for producing some of the world's finest string players, and there are many string orchestras in that region of the world. What makes the **BRNO CHAMBER SOLOISTS** so special? Michiko explains: "The natural, spontaneous musical flow, and the warmest of tone, to start with. There is nothing forced or artificial about their playing, and yet, at the same time, it is refined and polished. Their phrasing is warm yet passionate. The orchestra's director, Mr. Besperát, is a long time, highly regarded violin teacher at Brno Conservatory. Many of the musicians are his former students, hand-picked by him. So naturally, they play in the same style, which creates an effortless blend of phrases, tone, and vi-

brato. It is quite a treat to play with them, and I can't wait for our tour together next year!"

The U.S. tour of the BCS and Michiko will take place mid-October to mid-November of 2005, but the dates are going fast. Please get in touch with our office right away if you are interested in having this exciting group perform in your area.

THIS SEASON'S CHAMBER MUSIC CONCERTS



He not only plays like a true artist, he looks like one!
Violist Roger Chase

MICHIKO ALSO HAS ANOTHER involvement with Jan Škrdlík at the end of this coming season when he tours the U.S. with his trio, the **GIDEON STRING TRIO**, and the Canadian oboist, Philippe Magnan. The Gideon Trio and Philippe were invited to participate with Michiko on the Music Department Artist Series in Spivey Hall at Clayton State. They will be doing an all-Mozart program in anticipation of the big Mozart

year, i.e. the 250th anniversary of his birth. Besides the Oboe Quartet and the great Divertimento, K.563, the program will feature Michiko performing the Quartet in G-minor with the **GIDEON STRING TRIO**. This

had the opportunity to experience Roger's artistry first hand. Michiko was delighted to learn in 2001 that Roger relocated to Oberlin, Ohio, to become Professor of Viola at the Conservatory, making him much more available in this country. This tour will take place in January of 2005, as you will note from the itinerary box above. The duo will perform, among other things, Schubert's beautiful *Arpeggione* Sonata, Brahms' Sonata in F minor, and Paganini's *Capriccio* for Viola. "I have always been very fond of the *Arpeggione*," Michiko smiles. "I am very happy to have an opportunity to perform it several times with such a fine musician as Roger. And of course, Brahms' Sonata is a true chamber music masterpiece." As you can see there are still some open dates. If you would like to invite this duo of world-class chamber musicians to your area, please let us hear from you. In the meantime, Michiko and we wish you a wonderful autumn filled with inspiring music.



Photos:
Tat'ána Vymazalová (pg. 2, top of pg. 3)
David Jidlický (bottom of pg. 3)
Herb Ascherman (pg. 4)

raymond weiss
artist management, inc. (212) 581-8478
300 west 55th street, suite #5L, new york, ny 10019-5163
fax: (212) 581-84.79 e-mail: rwam@rwam.cnc.net
website: rwam.cnc.net