

# Michiko Otaki NEWSLETTER

Vol. VI, No. 1

Fall, 2002

*Michiko breathed a great sigh of relief when she arrived home in Atlanta after dropping the BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA at New York's Kennedy Airport this past March. As we mentioned in her last newsletter, the 2001-2002 season was packed full of different engagements, which required not just performance preparations but also intensive, strategic planning. Michiko managed to survive, and is looking forward to a quieter season this year when she can stay put as a professor, work on long-term plans and get programs ready for the next couple of seasons.*



**M**ICHIKO STILL SPEAKS with utter amazement when she looks back and wonders how she managed to do all that she had to accomplish: "I am not sure if I ever care to do it again. It was one stressful season." Of course, this is just a normal way of life for a full-time performer, but that is pretty much all their career involves. With Michiko's full-time job as a professor at Clayton State, however, it was extremely strenuous. With all the time away from the University comes the scheduling of makeup lessons, and there were, in addition, three big searches for new faculty underway in the Music Department. "If playing the piano were the only thing I had to worry about, these tours would be great fun!" Michiko reflects. "Of course, we practice for hours in preparation for the concerts, but what is really hard is what

had to be done outside of the performance. Everything has to be taken care of for the tour to go smoothly."

### TEAMING UP WITH OLD FRIENDS

THE FALL SEASON'S FIRST SET of concerts was with the **KODÁLY STRING QUARTET** from Hungary. "The **KODÁLY QUARTET** is one of the finest and most recorded string quartets performing today, and I was quite honored and happy to have the opportunity to work



Exuberant Dohnányi Quintet

with them," Michiko commented. "I've admired their work ever since I first heard them back in the mid 80's, and it was very special to be able to make music together with them." The early, rarely performed Dohnányi Piano Quintet which found such favor with Brahms was also a big hit with the audiences. Michiko will be joining the **KODÁLY QUARTET** in some of their concerts again when they return to the U.S. next fall. We will be updating you with availabilities in your area soon.

### PILSEN P-1 PETROF RECORDING

**MICHIKO'S** NEXT TASK WAS to travel to the Czech Republic early in January to make a recording of the Schumann A minor concerto with the **PILSEN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA** under the direction of Maestro **JIRÍ MALÁT**. The CD is to be used to promote their U.S. tour together in the 2003-2004 season. The trip was off to a shaky start. Michiko packed all her warm clothes, mufflers, gloves and hat



in her suitcase, which did not make it to the Prague airport. "As the carousel went around I was entertained by the advertisement which was painted on the belt by a cell phone company, which said something like 'you may lose your luggage but you will never lose a connection with us'. I thought it was funny, until I realized that my suitcase was, in fact, lost. It was not much fun running around Pilsen in the dead of winter without proper winter gear." The

**"It was an intriguing piano, and the first time ever the Mistral was used for a recording with symphony orchestra."**

suitcase did catch up with Michiko in Pilsen more than 30 hours later. Michiko decided that on her next winter travel she will pack her music, concert clothes and books in the suitcase and hand-carry her gloves and hat.

Because the piano in the Pilsen recording studio was in less than ideal shape for the recording, **Petrof**, the premier piano company in the Czech Republic, generously provided Michiko with their brand new, top-of-the-line *Mistral* P-1 concert grand piano for this project. "It was an intriguing piano, and the first time ever the *Mistral* was used for a recording with symphony orchestra," Michiko recalls. "The *Mistral's* appearance was quite innovative. I thought I'd seen pianos in all different colors, but never one that looked like a PT Cruiser. It was metallic brown, just like that automobile; and inside, the harp was a brilliant, glossy white. It certainly caught everyone's eye right away." Having trav-



A happy collaboration with Hungarians



It certainly looks different with the white interior...

eled though the cold weather from its home in Hradec Králové to Pilsen, the piano required quite a bit of attention and adjustment. "What set this instrument apart from others was its celestial top register," Michiko continues. "It sang like a bell, resonant, crystal clear yet warm. It was just genuinely a pity that Schumann's Concerto does not utilize that part of the piano more."

Michiko will be touring with the **PILSEN PHILHARMONIC** and Maestro Malát in the winter/spring of 2004. The tour is in the initial planning stage, but is expected to sell very quickly. If you or your organization is interested, or you know of someone else in your area who may be interested in presenting them, please let us know early so that we can secure the date in your area.

### TO MAINE IN WINTER

**MICHIKO'S NEXT TRIP** took her to another area known for its colder weather, this time in the U.S. Her performance of Mozart's Concerto in C major, K. 503, with the **PORTLAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA** conducted by Maestro **TOSHIYUKI SHIMADA** took place at the end of the month. It was Michiko's first trip up to Maine in nearly 20 years,



Winning smile of Maestro Shimada

and the first time she was there in the winter. She was quite concerned about the weather, and of course, this time she got on the plane with her hat and gloves in her hand. To her surprise, it was actually warmer in Portland than in Atlanta! "I only saw a little bit of snow on the ground. I was actually walking to the rehearsals, and was able to take a walk through the town. And

not one of Mozart's best efforts, with its rather unfinished sounding second movement and frivolous main theme of the last movement. But all those characteristics are just delightful to me. I don't know why, but it makes me smile every time I play it. I was so glad I had the opportunity to perform this work, especially with such an established orchestra and under a superb conductor."



...but the top register still rings like a bell

that was the end of January! Amazing!"

"Maestro Shimada is an exceptionally fine musician, has a wonderful sense for Mozart's music that I could immediately relate to, and he and his orchestra were extremely responsive," Michiko remembers fondly. The renovated Merrill Auditorium is superb acoustically, as well as visually. The concert was well attended, despite the good weather (Michiko felt that on such an unusually warm winter day no self-respecting residents of Maine would stay inside), and with the playoff for the Super Bowl taking place at the same time (one of the teams being New England Patriots). The game was obviously in many of audience members' minds, as Maestro Shimada's NFL updates during his commentary after the intermission were received with gratitude.

"Of Mozart's piano concerti, K. 503 is not the best known nor most often performed, but I just love it dearly," Michiko confesses. "Many people talk about it being

### CALIFORNIANS TO THE RESCUE

**SEPTEMBER 11TH** had an impact on nearly everyone's life, and Michiko's concert life was no exception. Michiko's longtime Polish friends and colleagues, the **WARSAW WIND QUINTET**, decided to cancel their U.S. tour in February because of their families' fear of terrorism. A substitute quintet had to be found quickly. Fortunately, a flutist in California, Mat Krejci, whom Michiko met during her 1997 West



Reviewing the recording with the Maestro

coast tour with the Slovak Sinfonietta of Žilina, came to her rescue. "I knew Mat was a fine player, and someone I could com-



Ariel Ensemble to the rescue



**Brno Chamber Orchestra teams up with Michiko again in the U.S....**

fortably work with. Of course, with four other musicians involved, it was quite complicated for Mat to be sure that all of his **ARIEL ENSEMBLE WIND QUINTET** members could do it. Everyone already had obligations/engagements, and we had to wait and see if it was going to work. It was rather

**“It takes courage to come out on stage and play this simple little concerto.”**

nerve-wracking there for a while. Everyone was much relieved when all was cleared and set.”

Once again, Michiko lucked out on the winter weather. Despite the concerns of the Californians and Michiko of touring in the Midwest (from Chicago to Cheyenne, WY) during February, they only en-



**Too beautiful a day in Ljubljana for a rehearsal**

countered one case of bad weather; otherwise it was quite mild—abnormally so. But that one day of scary weather almost made up for the entire extended mild period. And of course, it had to be the day they were to travel some 700 miles from Iowa to Wyoming. They left very early and went as far as they could, but finally had to stop in Grand Island, NE, and get rooms in a hotel. Luckily, that was their one day off, and they did make it to Cheyenne the next day, in time for their matinee. “I’ve seen blizzards in the movies and on TV, where people had to hold onto trees or poles in order not to be blown away or people unable to walk straight, keep their eyes open, or even breathe. It never occurred to me before to even



**“I just love this piano!”**

imagine how that must feel. I now know exactly what it’s like. It was truly an experience; I don’t think I want to be in such weather ever again, however.”

This tour turned out to be quite unique for Michiko in another way. “The Quintet kept asking me why I was so quiet and not saying anything during the rehearsals, like the rest of them,” Michiko recalls with

a smile. “I was too embarrassed to tell them the truth. The truth was that I was absolutely stunned—stunned that I was understanding every single word of what they were saying! I didn’t know quite how to react.” Especially when working on the woodwind repertoire, Michiko is used to hearing Polish swirling around her (even



**...and at the Ljubljana Castle.**

though she picked up just enough Polish to the extent that she could make a pretty good guess at what’s going on in rehearsals, at least some of the time), and then one of the group’s members turning around to ask her opinion in English. With these California musicians, it was totally different. “I was really part of the group, speaking the same language. It took a good 24 hours for me to get used to the idea and make a mental adjustment. Once I did make this adjustment, the whole thing was a lot of fun. Come to think of it, this was really the first time I made an extensive tour with an American ensemble, and the first time that I did not have to be the “mother hen,” taking care of musicians barely speaking English who just arrived from Europe.”

**ON THE ROAD AGAIN WITH THE BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

**MICHIKO HAD A PRECIOUS** five-hour period to spend at her home in Atlanta on the way from the Midwest to Miami, Florida, to meet


**Please visit**
  
<http://a-s.clayton.edu/otaki/shortbio.html>  
 for Michiko’s activities with various ensembles  
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<http://a-s.clayton.edu/otaki/discogra.htm>  
 for her complete discography

the **BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA** to start the next tour (“I do not want to remember that awful day!”). This was Michiko’s third U.S. tour with the **BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**, and the first one after the release of their CD on the *Klavier* label. As many of you already know, Michiko’s first collaboration with this orchestra was the recording of Mozart’s C major Concerto (K. 415) back in 1994. Because there are only four Mozart piano concerti which could be performed without wind instruments and because Michiko had recorded and toured with three of them already, that left the one in F major, K. 413, for this tour. “It is not only the least often played of the above-mentioned four, but probably the most seldom performed mature concerto of Mozart,” says Michiko. “There is nothing spectacular about this concerto. No dazzling finger work, no sophisticated or innovative modulations, no complex form that would excite a musicologist. It is that very simplicity which makes this concerto very scary to perform in public. It takes courage to come out on stage, greeted by applause, sit in the spotlight and play this simple little concerto that every young, decent student could play fairly easily. There is really nowhere to hide, it is so bare.

I’ve hesitated before making my mind up to carry this concerto on the tour, because of these factors. But I am truly glad I did; this concerto is truly a gem.” Critics and audiences agreed, as you can see from the review excerpts.

### SEASON FINALE AT THE LJUBLJANA SUMMER FESTIVAL

THE SEASON’S GRAND FINALE came during the summer with Michiko’s appearance at the Ljubljana Summer Festival with the **BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**. It was the 50th Anniversary of the Festival and it was extremely well programed and publicized, with performances by more than 35 renowned artists and groups running the complete artistic gamut between July 2nd (Bolshoi Ballet) and mid-September. Fortunately the Brno musicians were able to travel to Ljubljana and back at the time of their con-

cert on August 14 with no significant difficulties despite the severe problems of flooding in parts of their country and Austria, and the performance of the Mozart Concerto in E-flat major, K. 449 with Michiko was very well received, indeed, with a national broadcast of the concert. “The setting at the Ljubljana Castle was lovely, and we had one of the best pianos I’ve ever played. On our earlier U.S. tour, I had the good fortune of performing on a couple of newly and superbly renovated pianos (the one at Elon University comes to mind, as you can see from the review quotes), and this one at the Castle was another that was a sheer delight to work with,” Michiko remembers. Plans are underway for more collaborations with the **BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

for the forthcoming seasons, especially in Europe.

Speaking of future plans, Michiko is also exploring the possibility of recitals with violist **ROGER CHASE**, whom she has known for almost 20 years. Roger, of course, was the violist in the UK’s famed Nash Ensemble for two decades, has toured the U.S. several times as soloist and with the Esterházy Baryton Trio, and recently relocated here to become a professor at a major American music conservatory. As they say in the radio business: “stay tuned!”

## Michiko’s Reviews from her Third U.S. Tour

with the **BRNO CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

February-March, 2002



“Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 11 in F major, K. 413, was well served by Otaki’s careful and stylish playing. Use of the University’s recently-restored 1923 Steinway piano aided her production of a crystalline and pure piano sound that conveyed Mozart’s score without blemish. She played with the piano lid fully up, allowing for a full range of sound color. Her sensitive and light touch was well balanced by the small string ensemble, which matched her in exactness and purity.”

*William Thomas Walker, Classical Voice North Carolina*

“Otaki played the pert Allegro with affectionate clarity and the Brno musicians gave her some of that mellow Bohemian warmth.”

*James Roos, The Miami Herald*

“One of the finest performances of the concert season took place at the Bijou Theatre...a wonderful performance...brightly and cheerfully played by Brno’s 12 string players. Then Otaki gave one of the purist classical performances of a Mozart piano concerto heard here in a long time. Her clean, precise technique...a beautiful singing quality that was carefully balanced against the texture of the Brno’s sensitive accompaniment.”

*Harold Duckett, The News-Sentinel, Knoxville, TN*

“Otaki played Mozart comfortably, with the requisite elegance.”

*Tim Thompson, Palm Beach Daily News*

“Otaki is an immaculate technician who can doubtless spin a shapely phrase in her sleep. Ms. Otaki’s scales glittered and her phrasing nuances were duplicated by all....liquid legato and well-defined accents.”

*Paul Somers, Classical New Jersey*

**raymond weiss**

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