

Remembering Biowarfare Unit 731 Through Musical Activism: A Performance of the Choral Work *The Devil's Gluttony* 音楽活動をとうして生物兵器731部隊を思い浮かべる 合唱組曲「悪魔の飽食」のコンサート

Philip Seaton

Kitara is Sapporo's state-of-the-art concert hall in the middle of picturesque Nakajima Park. On 2 July 2014 I went there with different expectations than usual. I was not going to hear a professional orchestra playing a masterpiece of the classical repertoire, but an amateur choir singing a little-known choral work called *Akuma no Hōshoku* (*The Devil's Gluttony*), composed by Ikebe Shinichiro with words by Morimura Seiichi, a leading novelist. The piece was about Unit 731, Japan's infamous chemical and biological warfare unit located near Harbin in northeastern China (Manchukuo) in the years 1934-45, which murdered 3,000 people in gruesome vivisections and medical experiments.



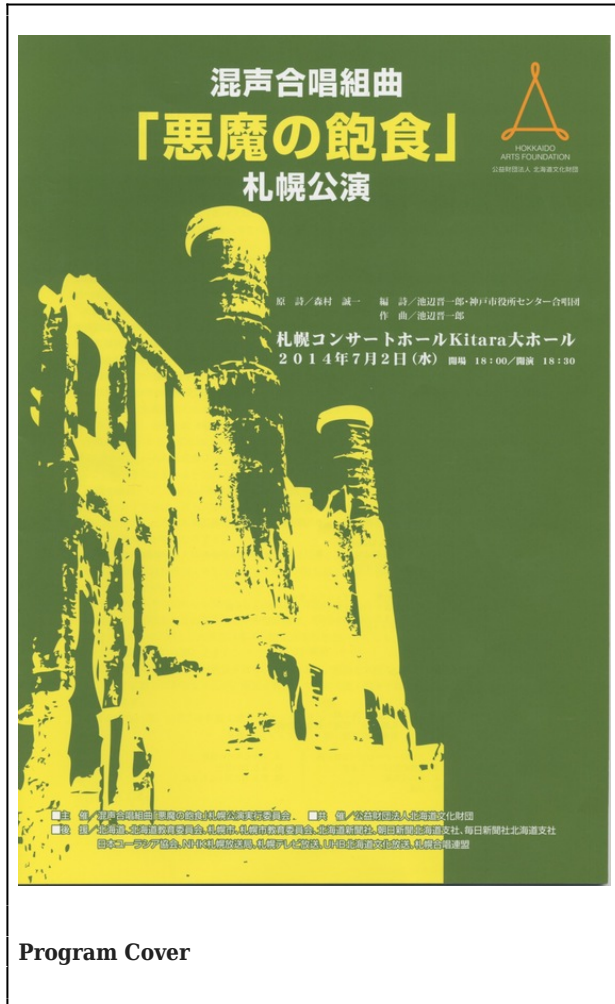
Kitara Concert Hall, Sapporo

I am a classical music fan and have many

pieces inspired by war in my music collection. They fall into various categories. There are nationalistic celebrations of victory or defiance, such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* or Shostakovich's epic *Symphony Number 7 "Leningrad"*. I deeply admire Benjamin Britten's masterpiece *War Requiem*, which sets to music some of the most memorable poetry from World War I and seeks to transcend nationalism through having soloists representing different nationalities. There are also film scores, such as John Williams' haunting violin solos from *Schindler's List* and the martial marches from films such as *The Dambusters*. I also have two symphonies by Japanese composers about Hiroshima, Ohki Masao's *Symphony Number 5 "Hiroshima"* and the *Symphony Number 1 "Hiroshima"* by Samuragochi Mamoru.¹

Based on these examples, the ability of music to convey either jingoism or the pity of war seemed so intuitive. But how could classical music effectively depict atrocity, especially something as gruesome as human experimentation? How could music represent an inherently psychological or intellectual concept such as "acknowledgement of past crimes" rather than a highly emotional one such as "elation at victory" or "grief at loss"? I imagined I was in for a difficult evening of contemporary music, with excruciating harmonies and dissonances to symbolize the pain of the victims of human experimentation. When I purchased my ticket, therefore, I was driven more by curiosity derived from my

interest in war history than by any particular musical expectations. I simply wanted to find out what Unit 731 could possibly sound like musically.



Program Cover

I arrived at Kitara expecting to find a relatively small audience, but to my astonishment the 2008-seat main hall was almost filled to capacity. Furthermore, the first half of the concert was not *Akuma no Hōshoku* (which was the only piece advertised on the posters I had seen and which dominated the program cover) but three short sets of pieces by local performers: some Japanese folk songs, some Latin American dances performed by an accordion quartet, and some operatic arias performed by three local music university graduates who perform at schools and civic centers with the aim of making opera more

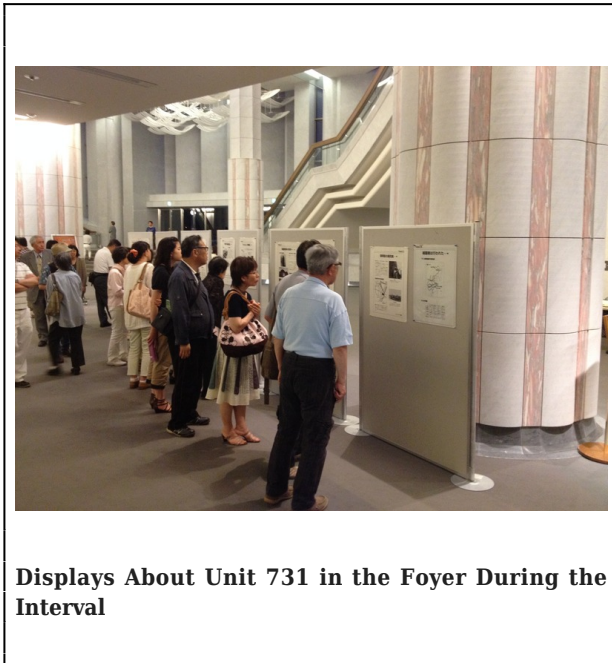
accessible. All three sets of pieces seemed so out of synch with what was to follow in the second half. It was as if we were being encouraged to remember the joy of life as a prelude to seeing the cruelest pain of death after the interval.

With the operatic aria *O Sole Mio* sung with appropriate *joie de vivre* still fresh in our minds, we streamed out into the foyer for the interval. There was a panel display giving the history and activities of Unit 731. I bumped into some local history activist friends who were supporting the event. The talk among us during the interval was all about the recent reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution by the Abe administration that paves the way for “collective self-defense” and a more active military role for Japan. What more appropriate time could there be for a performance of Ikebe’s work about the cruelties of war?, someone commented. People nodded in agreement.

We returned to our seats for the second half. Ikebe Shinichiro took to the stage with a microphone. After recalling with warmth and humor the music of the first half, Ikebe introduced the topic of the war via his observations about the recent seventieth anniversary of the D-Day landings in Europe. The presence of German Chancellor Angela Merkel alongside the leaders of the erstwhile enemies of Germany was symbolic of how far Europe has gone along the road of postwar reconciliation. Meanwhile, Japan was still mired in historical issues with neighboring countries, such as the contentious issue of worship at Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Abe. Ripples of applause broke out in the audience as people supported these sentiments.

Then he turned to an explanation of his music. Unlike his other compositions, this was a piece he wished did not have to be written. Furthermore, echoing a sentiment in his

program notes, Ikebe added that this is an unusual piece because he looks forward to the day when it does not need to be performed any more. As long as there is a danger of war, this piece will be needed to remind people of the horrors of war, but when the danger of war no longer exists, the piece will have fulfilled its task, Ikebe explained.



Displays About Unit 731 in the Foyer During the Interval

Ikebe ended his talk and the choir walked onto the stage. It was over 200 members strong, an amalgamation of a number of local choirs from across Hokkaido. It was not only the audience that had exceeded all numerical expectation.

Ikebe conducted the performance of his own composition. *Akuma no Hōshoku* is in seven movements.² Movement 1 (*Prologue: The Heavy Chains of 731*) sets the scene, “twenty kilometers from Harbin, six kilometers square of hell”, and recounted Ishii Shiro’s order to his men to take their secrets to the grave. Movement 2 (*We Deliver Live Subjects*) listed the victims, germs and ghastly experiments of Unit 731: “Chinese, Russians, Mongolians, Koreans ...”, “cholera, typhus, dysentery, plague ...”, “A frostbite experiment, starvation, dehydration ...”, all sung to menacing rhythms. Movement 3 (*Red Chinese Shoes*) was a

poignant and deeply suggestive story of a father who wanted to, but could not, give his daughter some red shoes. Movement 4 (*Rebellion*) described a rebellion by the “logs” (*maruta*), people destined to die in medical experiments. “Rather than living as a Marta [sic] death as a person”. Movement 5 (*A Wake in the Thirty-Seventh Year*) was when the emotional reaction from the audience was greatest (and some sniffles could be heard among the audience, which otherwise was even quieter than during other movements). It described the killing of a Russian “mother log” and her “daughter log”, who was four years of age and had been born in Unit 731. Movement 6 (*Friends, Bring White Flowers*) called people to remember the victims and members of the choir laid white flowers in remembrance as part of the performance. Movement 7 (*You Should Watch*) was a resolute and uplifting “we will not forget” to end the concert.

[Listen to composer's discussion and excerpts from a different performance \(from 5 minutes\) on YouTube](#)

As the piece ended, the audience applauded enthusiastically. Ikebe walked off the stage and returned to receive the acclaim of the audience, as per classical concert style. But beyond that he did not take any curtain calls. Instead, he simply announced that the third movement would be repeated as an encore. This was not a time for adulation and acclaim for him as one of Japan’s most acclaimed composers. That would be inappropriate to the messages and meanings of the piece of music we had just heard. Following the encore he brought the applause to a close by leaving the stage and not returning. The concert hall announcer quickly clarified that the concert was over. Ikebe’s desire to curtail the applause and end proceedings as soon as possible would be considered poor etiquette in the context of almost any other classical music concert, but here it seemed perfectly appropriate. I was moved by his dignity and humility. He did not

want to be the center of attention, even though he had every right to be as composer and conductor. Instead, he let the piece and its message take center stage.



Ikebe Shinichiro (left) and Morimura Seiichi

Ultimately, as a piece of music *Akuma no Hōshoku* had confounded all my expectations. It was lyrical from beginning to end, although clearly with some modern elements rather than in a purely romantic style. The music was not primarily about conveying the meaning of the words, with dissonance representing pain, for example. Instead, the music was a means for getting people involved. Melodically speaking it was accessible, and technically speaking it was manageable for local amateur choral societies to perform. The accompaniment was just a piano, so that an amateur choir could put together a performance without needing to hire a costly ensemble of musicians. In a word, despite its ghastly subject matter, *Akuma no Hōshoku* was eminently “performable”. As I listened to the performance, I realized that ultimately this piece was about taking part and absorbing the message as either performer or listener, as is described by Franziska Seraphim in her discussions of *Akuma no Hoshoku* in *War and Social Politics in Japan, 1945-2005*³. A choir of over 200 ordinary Japanese people had

sung a stark message about the need to acknowledge Japanese war atrocities, and it had been listened to intently by an audience of nearly 2000 people. This was musical activism at its finest.

In an era in which the words and actions of nationalistic Japanese and officials gain the majority of media attention, this performance of *Akuma no Hōshoku* spoke volumes of the quiet power of progressive grassroots activism. You will not find a CD of *Akuma no Hōshoku* on amazon.com, although a privately-produced CD of a previous performance in Hokkaido (in Asahikawa in 2009) was on sale at the concert and excerpts from another performance by an amateur choir are available on YouTube (see the link above). Beyond publication of the sheet music, this piece has no major backing from the commercial music industry. The piece is sustained and promoted by a wide range of ordinary people who support the idea that it is best to face directly the ugliest aspects of Japan's wartime history as a way of building a better future. Ikebe and Morimura have provided a poignant means for people to do so through music.

The first performance was in 1984, and these days, according to Ikebe's program notes, *Akuma no Hōshoku* is performed somewhere in Japan every year. It has also been performed 6 times overseas. This includes two performances in Harbin and Shenyang in 1998, at which the 240-strong delegation from Japan, which included Ikebe and Morimura, performed the piece to an audience including the relatives of Unit 731 victims. The trip also included a visit to the Unit 731 memorial museum by members of the choir. The warm reception received in China reveals the power of the music to promote reconciliation.⁴

As I walked back to Nakajima Park station at the end of the concert, I reflected once again on something I have argued repeatedly in my work as an author specializing in war history

and memories in Japan. We find it very easy to criticize the Japanese for "forgetting history", but in turn we must be wary of "forgetting the people who remember". The international media is often guilty of this in the context of Japan and World War II. Hearing Ikebe's *Akuma no Hōshoku* was an inspiring experience. As a piece of musical activism that provided uplifting evidence of a determination among many Japanese people that the horrors of war will not be forgotten, and particularly given that it (quite coincidentally) was performed one day after the Abe administration took a giant step towards legitimizing Japan's capability to once again go to war, this concert rates as one of the most memorable musical experiences of my life.

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Notes

¹ In February 2014, Samuragochi, who had been dubbed the "Japanese Beethoven" was revealed as a fraud. His symphony was ghostwritten and possibly not even originally written with the A-bombing of Hiroshima in mind. But from 2008 to 2014 it had been lauded as an inspiring musical tribute to

victims in Hiroshima.

² For a full translation of the poem by Morimura set to music by Ikebe, see Yasuo Kawabata, “The Role of Drama for Regional Reconciliation: “Ho’o Pono Pono: Pax Pacifica” Proposed by Johan Galtung and Transcend-

Japan”, pp. 108-113. Available [here](#).

³ Franziska Seraphim (2006) *War Memory and Social Politics in Japan, 1945-2005*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 287-95.

⁴ Kawabata, pp. 103-4.