

TRAVEL

# DSO discovers good eating Japanese style

(The Detroit Symphony Orchestra is on tour in Japan through Tuesday, Nov. 24. In this article Ervin Monroe gives his impressions of Japan.)

BY ERVIN MONROE  
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The Arrival: Fourteen hours and four movies later - the musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra disembarked Flight No. 71, a non-stop from Detroit to Nagoya, Japan. We are weary but ready to begin our Northwest Airlines Friendship Tour to Japan, with concerts in Toyota City and Otsu City.

We landed in Nagoya on schedule at approximately 6:30 pm. It was dark and the air was warm and humid. The bus ride to Toyota was very interesting. The local businesses were well lit with bright lights and brilliant colors and English words sporadically appeared as part of company names or advertising jargon.

Words like "Family Mart," "Super Dry," and "Tune-Up" appeared out of nowhere.

Even delivery trucks had the word "Express" written underneath highlighted Japanese characters.

The Orchestra is staying in two different hotels, and ours is on the outskirts of town. We were anxious to eat upon arrival, and there were several restaurants in the neighborhood. We ate with several other musicians to dine in Japanese style. We found an interesting spot.

Upon entry we discovered several of our group already dining. Caroline Coade of Birmingham, violinist, and Jeffery Zook of Royal Oak, piccoloist, were sitting in the traditional section enjoying bowls of noodles. We decided to also sit in that area of the restaurant but quickly realized the difficulties involved for the tall members of our party.

Donald Baker, our principal oboist, is 6 feet, 3 inches tall and had a challenge getting his feet under the very low table. He finally locked into a strange position, his knees nearly at his ears, looking like an Olympic luge racer.

I sat between my wife and Sharon Sparrow, flutist, who finally found a comfortable position by stretching out their legs to the side, Cleopatra-Style. With my legs crossed, I felt like a Buddha surrounded by two Princesses of the Nile.

We successfully ordered by pointing to items on the menu, and were quickly enjoying the local fare. The only mistake the waiter made was to bring one more extra large sake than requested.

This was no problem, really. Susan, Sharon and I ordered shabu-shabu, a Japanese fondue.

Day 1: Free Day. The Orchestra has two tour choices. Our buses headed for a Cultural Cen-



Eager to learn: Japanese students get a music lesson from Ervin Monroe, principal flutist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

ter, which had an unusual collection of ancient tea pots discovered in different parts of Japan.

## Tea time

The exhibition also featured many modern day art works and a ceremonial Tea Room where we were served by women dressed in traditional Japanese kimonos.

This green tea was frothy and thick. Mine tasted and smelled very much like the grass I mow in my front lawn. In another building at the exhibit we were offered the more traditional green tea, along with a snack which consisted of warm rice mixed with soy paste served on a poppicle stick.

It was rather tasty, and we later learned that this rice on a stick is a common snack here. We traveled from the Art Center to Koraneki. The winding roads passed over so close to the homes along the way, and at times I could look out our bus window and see the ceramic tile roofs an arm's length away.

There were many vending machines along the road, and American words were again prevalent, though not always appropriate. One popular drink in vending machines is called "Sweet" - hardly appetizing, even when thirsty.

The resort area we visited reminded me of Ogunquit, Maine, or Tarpon Springs, Florida. It was a quaint village

of shops and interesting scenery, with amazing traffic jams on the outskirts. We were surrounded by mountainous terrain with the color of Japanese maples.

One could stroll among the many street shops, or take a tall pedestrian bridge over a rocky creek to a wooded walkway that led to a nature hike. There were many people in the shopping area, but we were the only non-Japanese in the crowd.

## At the temple

There was an interesting Shin-to temple nearby, and we watched as many Japanese visitors approached the altar to toss coins into an open box and pull one of three long cords hanging in the entranceway. A bell would clang.

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As is typical even in America, there was a long line in front of the ladies' room, and there was no waiting at the men's room directly adjacent. Geoff and I had no sooner begun taking care of our business when a young

lady emerged from a stall behind us. "Are we in the wrong place?" I asked Geoff. "We're standing, aren't we?" he replied.

## Maybe oops

"I think I remember reading that they do this kind of thing over here," he added. Even as he finished his sentence, two other ladies came into the room and entered the stalls, politely holding their hands as though shielding their eyes from us as they passed.

Susan and Lenore waited in line for the women's room which they also found quite different than the public restrooms in America. Upon entering a very narrow cubby, women delicately straddle a long thin ceramic bowl mounted flush to the floor.

There's no room for error, and women here apparently become very accomplished at the delicate and precise maneuver.

Back to the hotel after our sightseeing journey, we flipped on the television in the room. Susan became intrigued by the Sumo wrestlers, who were apparently in some kind of tournament. This was one of several programs that were broadcast simultaneously in both Japanese and English, a new and provocative demand on the mental focus of weary travelers, which proved too draining for us. So we decided to take a stroll instead and look for a small restaurant away from the main business thoroughfare.

We found a little cluster of stores that included a carry-out place that had the word "Snack" written above it and we could smell food and hear sounds from an adjoining building that appeared to be a very small restaurant.

We peered through the window and saw a counter with stools filled with people eating. We finally took courage and walked inside where we instantly became the center of attention.

The lady behind the counter motioned us toward a tiny back room where we could see some tables, but two men sitting at the counter offered us their seats. There was much chatter, and we knew instantly that our presence was an unusual event. This was obviously a community gathering place, and the work area behind the counter was like a home kitchen.

I ordered a beer, "biere" here. I held up my fingers for two, and we were served two small glasses and one giant bottle. No sooner had I poured the beer than the gentleman sitting on Susan's right and the lady behind the counter offered a toast of "Cheers," so we returned the salute.

## What menu?

Ordering food, however, was not as easy. We asked for a "menu," a word everyone understood, and the whole place broke out in laughter. One of the ladies behind the counter pointed to this small piece of paper pinned to the wall, covered in Japanese characters.

This was going to be a challenge. Susan was carving on a Robison Caruso-and-Friday conversation with the gentleman on her right, and neither seemed to be making great progress in communication but were having a good time trying.

We noticed some giant pieces of tofu being warmed in broth on the counter in front of us. We pointed to it, and the lady brought two bowls. It was good. We tried naming different dishes, but no one seemed to understand.

Eventually the word "nashimi" arose, and I nodded approval. One of the workers in the busy little restaurant produced a package of raw fish still wrapped from the local mart.

She pointed to both sides of the container, one being tuna and the other mackerel. I nodded approval to both sides. She appeared surprised that I would order so much, and I realized that this was not a typical work-

ing man's fare. After it was served, I became very aware of my chopstick technique because we were being scrutinized by everyone present. I knew we were doing dimly when Susan's new friend complimented our efforts with "Chopsticks-good."

Shortly thereafter I splashed a generous amount of soy sauce all across my white shirt and turned quickly to see if I was caught in the act by the locals both standing and seated. Miraculously, it must have happened at the only moment when they were all looking away!

These are very polite people. Three men-in-suits arrived, young businessman, and sat at the other end of the counter by the grill. With each newcomer, we could hear the word "menu" included in their conversation followed by a round of hearty laughter.

One of the ladies behind the counter began preparing what looked to us like waffles. We watched her with interest, and soon were served two large portions of more tofu, compliments of the men by the grill.

One carefully said to us, "Delicious," and we nodded approval. Shortly thereafter, Susan and I requested a check.

We realized they were purposefully delaying when we were suddenly served a dainty saucer with some small shavings in a fine brown teriyaki sauce. Susan's new friend pointed to his ankle tendons. I think the dish contained pig knuckles. I realized that I was being tested by the natives, who had not been sufficiently impressed that I could eat raw fish.

## His finest hour

Susan looked on in horror while I began what would most likely be my most challenging performance of our Japan Friendship Tour.

The delicacy was very chewy, and I finished the dish very quickly. The lady brought the check, and announced the total in Japanese.

I looked puzzled, and she repeated the sum, as though I could understand. She laughed when I gestured for her to write it out. As we stood to go, a gentleman who might have been the owner came to us with a baby boy in his arms. He said something to the young lad, who then put his hands to his lips and blew kisses to us. We returned the gesture and everyone smiled and waved goodbye. It was special evening.

Tomorrow we begin our concerts.

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