

Seiji Ozawa: Listening to Great Music is Pure Joy

—— The Simplest and Most Complex Pleasure

From China to Japan to Europe

Seiji Ozawa was born on September 1, 1935, in Mukden (present-day Shenyang, China), a city under Japanese occupation in Manchuria. He was the third child in a family of modest means with roots in Yamanashi Prefecture, Honshu, Japan. His father, Kaisaku, became a dentist through sheer determination, moving to China at the age of 23 to open a clinic in Changchun. There he met Ozawa's mother, Wakamatsu Sakura. After relocating to Manchukuo (the Japanese puppet state in Manchuria), Kaisaku became an enthusiastic supporter of Pan-Asianism and a founding member of the Manchukuo Concordia Society. The family eventually moved from Changchun to Mukden.

At age five, Ozawa received an accordion from his mother, either as a birthday or Christmas gift. When he was six, the family returned to Japan, settling in Tachikawa on the western outskirts of Tokyo—marking Ozawa's first time stepping foot in Japan. To celebrate their return, relatives sent the family a piano, which Ozawa's older brothers transported from Yokohama to Tachikawa using a handcart, a three-day journey.

Despite having access to instruments from an early age, Ozawa did not begin serious piano lessons until the age of 10, aspiring to become a pianist. Unfortunately, at around 15, a rugby injury left him with two broken fingers, ending his piano ambitions. That same year, he attended a concert at Tokyo's Hibiya Music Hall where Leonid Kreutzer conducted the Japan Symphony Orchestra (now NHK Symphony Orchestra) while performing Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5*. The performance captivated Ozawa, leading him to shift his focus to conducting. He began studying with Hideo Saitō, a music educator, cellist, and distant relative.

In Saitō's conducting class, Ozawa met Naozumi Yamamoto, a conductor and composer of the *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* film series theme. Yamamoto co-founded Toho Gakuen School of Music, where Ozawa frequently studied and observed lessons. In 1955, he enrolled in the school's undergraduate program and began envisioning further studies in Europe to deepen his musical knowledge. Encouraging Ozawa's aspirations, Yamamoto told him:

"Music is like a pyramid. I will stay here to broaden its base, but you must go to Europe to aim for the pinnacle of the music world."

Four years later, in February 1959, the 23-year-old Ozawa boarded a cargo ship bound for France. That year, he entered the Besançon International Competition for Young Conductors,

despite having missed the application deadline. With the help of a U.S. embassy staffer, he was allowed to compete and won the top prize, launching his illustrious career.

One of the judges, Charles Munch, then music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, recommended Ozawa for the Tanglewood Music Festival, held annually by the orchestra. In 1960, Ozawa participated in the festival, briefly studying with Munch and Pierre Monteux, and earned Tanglewood's highest honor, the Koussevitzky Prize for Outstanding Student Conductor. This recognition secured him a scholarship to study conducting under Herbert von Karajan.

By this time, Karajan was chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. Ozawa relocated to West Berlin to study under him, which brought him to the attention of Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein appointed Ozawa as assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic for the 1961-62 and 1964-65 seasons.

Ozawa made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1961 and first conducted the San Francisco Symphony in 1962. To date, he remains the only conductor to have studied under both Karajan and Bernstein.



Young Seiji Ozawa and Bernstein

Rising Conductor: Challenges and Support

In 1962, Seiji Ozawa was hired to conduct the NHK Symphony Orchestra for a six-month term. At just 27 years old, he faced resistance from some orchestra members, who seemed unhappy about performing under such a young conductor. Certain musicians accused Ozawa of being rude or lacking humility, even refusing to play under his direction.

In response, notable figures from Japan's arts and literary communities, including Asari Keita, Ishihara Shintarō, Inoue Yasushi, Ōe Kenzaburō, Takemitsu Tōru, Tanikawa Shuntarō, and Mishima Yukio, organized a concert to showcase Ozawa's talent. This event underscored his potential and garnered significant support. However, after his unpleasant experience with the NHK Symphony Orchestra, Ozawa turned his attention to the international stage.



27-year-old Seiji Ozawa

From 1964 to 1968, Ozawa served as the first music director of the Ravinia Festival, the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, becoming its principal conductor in 1969. In 1966, he debuted with the Vienna Philharmonic at the Salzburg Festival.

Between 1965 and 1969, Ozawa was also the music director of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. During his tenure, he conducted many works by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Mahler for the first time. In an interview at the end of a concert season, Ozawa expressed gratitude to the audience for their patience and support.

In 1965, Ozawa and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra performed for the opening of Toronto City Hall, at the Glasgow Commonwealth Arts Festival, and at Montreal's Expo 67. They also recorded several notable albums, including Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1966 and Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* in 1967, with pianist Yvonne Loriod, which received a Grammy nomination. Years later, Messiaen entrusted Ozawa with the Paris premiere of his opera *Saint François d'Assise*.

In 1967, Ozawa met Miki Irie, a Japanese-Russian model, actress, and fashion designer, through a mutual friend. The two fell in love instantly and married a year later, in September 1968. Their first child, daughter Seira Ozawa, was born in 1970, followed by their son Yuki Yoshi Ozawa in 1974.

After their marriage, Irie gave up her career to fully support Ozawa's global tours. She designed everyday attire and special occasion outfits for her husband and children. Ozawa often referred to her as his confidante and muse.



Miki Irie

Orchestral Turmoil: Turning the Tide

In 1972, while serving as principal conductor of the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa faced a major crisis when the orchestra's sponsor, the Fuji Sankei Group, announced its withdrawal of funding. Rushing back to Japan from the United States, Ozawa fought tirelessly to save the orchestra, even appealing directly to the Emperor of Japan for support. At the awards ceremony for the Japan Art Academy Prize that same year, he openly declared, "I am a recipient of this prize, yet the orchestra I work for is in dire straits."

Despite his efforts, the orchestra was dissolved and restructured as an independent ensemble. Later, it reformed as a foundation, ensuring its survival. Subsequently, Ozawa collaborated with Naozumi Yamamoto to establish the New Japan Philharmonic, which Ozawa conducted exclusively during his time in Japan. Yamamoto and the New Japan Philharmonic frequently appeared on television alongside orchestras where Ozawa served as a guest conductor.



Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Shaping His Era

From 1970 to 2002, Ozawa, alongside Gunther Schuller, served as artistic director of the Tanglewood Berkshire Music Festival. His tenure as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) began in 1973 and lasted nearly 30 years, until 2002—surpassing Serge Koussevitzky’s 25-year record and marking an unprecedented chapter in BSO’s history.

Ozawa was also music director of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra from 1970 to 1976. There, he blended Leonard Bernstein’s charisma with the countercultural spirit of the West Coast, sporting long hair and floral shirts while occasionally programming crossover concerts. In 1972, he led the orchestra in recording its first commercial album in a decade, featuring music inspired by Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The following year, he conducted the orchestra’s European tour, highlighted by a Paris concert broadcast live via satellite in stereo to San Francisco’s KKKH radio station.



However, in 1974, Ozawa became embroiled in a dispute with the orchestra’s musicians’ committee, which blocked his attempt to grant tenure to two young musicians—timpanist Elayne Jones and bassoonist Ryohei Nakagawa.

Ozawa was a strong advocate for contemporary music during this period. In 1974, he collaborated with Toho Gakuen Orchestra, cellist Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, and violist Nobuko Imai for a performance, and in 1975, he commissioned György Ligeti’s *San Francisco Polyphony*.

In 1976, Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra performed *A Night at Symphony Hall*, broadcast by PBS, earning him his first Emmy Award. His second Emmy came in 1994 for *Dvořák in Prague: A Celebration*. Throughout his tenure at Tanglewood, the BSO’s summer home, Ozawa dedicated himself to teaching and mentoring young musicians, providing high school students and aspiring professionals with guidance and performance opportunities.

In 1994, the BSO inaugurated a new concert hall at Tanglewood, naming it the Seiji Ozawa Hall to commemorate his 20th season with the orchestra—a fitting tribute to his enduring legacy.



Opera performance ends

Entering the World of Opera

In 1979, Seiji Ozawa made his debut at the Paris Opera and conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with the Beijing Symphony Orchestra by the year's end. This marked the first live performance of the symphony in China since the 1961 ban on Western music. In 1980, he debuted at La Scala in Milan, and in 1988, he performed at the Vienna State Opera, establishing himself as one of the leading opera conductors globally.

In 1992, Ozawa debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, conducting Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* with soprano Mirella Freni as Tatyana.



Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood Music Center

During the 1996-1997 period, Ozawa sparked controversy by demanding reforms at the Tanglewood Music Center. This led to the resignation of pianists Gilbert Kalish and Leon Fleisher in protest. Composer and critic Greg Sandow also publicly criticized Ozawa's decisions.

Despite his U.S. achievements during 1987-1997, Ozawa shifted his focus to Japan in 1987 to be closer to his children, who were entering middle school. He founded the Saito Kinen Orchestra, composed of his former students, striving to develop it into a world-class ensemble. Three years later, he became the artistic advisor of the Mito Chamber Orchestra and, in 1992, organized and served as artistic director of the Saito Kinen Matsumoto Music Festival.



Seiji Ozawa and his family

In 1998, Ozawa conducted Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* for the Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Nagano, Japan. This groundbreaking performance involved synchronized international participation, with choirs from Beijing, Berlin, Cape Town, New York, and Sydney joining the Nagano Olympic Stadium audience in real-time.



Opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan (1998)

In 2000, Ozawa co-founded the Seiji Ozawa Music Academy with Ken Sato, then-president of Rohm Co., Ltd. The academy focuses on training young musicians through opera, reflecting Ozawa's belief in the inseparability of symphony and opera, a principle inspired by his mentor Herbert von Karajan. Supported by Rohm Co. and the Rohm Music Foundation, the academy has used the Kyoto Rohm Theatre as its base since 2016.

In 2005, Ozawa established the Tokyo Ninomori Opera and conducted Richard Strauss's *Elektra*. Eight years later, his recording of Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* at the Saito Kinen Matsumoto Music Festival won the 2016 Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording.

By 2015, the academy extended its reach to Kyoto's elementary school students, organizing special children's opera performances to introduce young audiences to the world of classical music.



Peak of Glory

On New Year's Day 2002, Seiji Ozawa conducted the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Concert, becoming the first Japanese conductor in the event's history. That same year, he stepped down as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra after nearly three decades and assumed the role of music director at the Vienna State Opera, a position he held until 2010.

During his tenure, Ozawa conducted notable productions, including Verdi's *Ernani* and *Falstaff*, and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*. As music director, he introduced new repertoire with productions like Janáček's *Jenůfa* and Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*.

Ozawa's recordings also achieved remarkable success. His 2002 New Year's Concert album with the Vienna Philharmonic sold 800,000 copies in Japan and over one million globally.

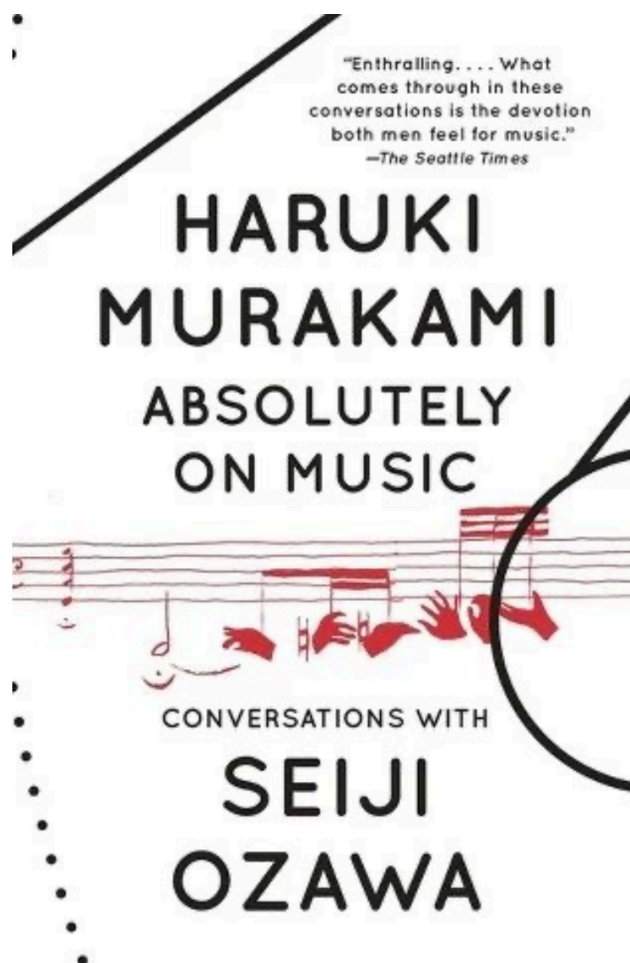
A Life of Dedication and Farewell

In his later years, Ozawa collaborated with cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich to form a touring music ensemble aimed at offering free concerts and workshops across Japan.

In 2006, the Vienna State Opera announced that Ozawa had to cancel all conducting engagements for the year due to health issues, including pneumonia and shingles. After recovering, he returned to the podium in March 2007 at the Tokyo Ninomori Opera Theatre.

Ozawa stepped down from the Vienna State Opera in 2010, with Franz Welser-Möst succeeding him. That same year, he announced a six-month hiatus to undergo treatment for early-stage esophageal cancer. His health struggles also included pneumonia and severe spinal issues requiring surgery.

During his recovery, Ozawa engaged in six conversations with novelist Haruki Murakami about classical music, which later became the foundation of their book *Absolutely on Music*.



In 2018, Ozawa and his wife Miki celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

Ozawa's last tour in Japan took place in 2020. On November 22, 2022, he conducted his final concert with the Saito Kinen Orchestra, leading Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* from a wheelchair. The performance was broadcast live to astronauts aboard the International Space Station, including Koichi Wakata.

On February 6, 2024, at the age of 88, Seiji Ozawa passed away from heart failure at his home in Tokyo, surrounded by his wife, children, and grandchildren.

Ozawa's daughter, Seira Ozawa, is an essayist known for works such as *It Will Never End* and *Letters Now, Where Are You?*. His son, Yuki Yoshi Ozawa, is an actor who has appeared in notable films such as *Fireflies: River of Light*, *BALLAD: A Nameless Love Song*, *The Brain Man*, and *Try to Die Once*. He has also starred in TV dramas like *Miss Sherlock*, *The Life of Hachiko*, and *Fate's Love*.