



Along with 13 members of the orchestra, ten soloists and 90 chorus members from Los Angeles and Japan perform Japanese language opera “Kaguya Hime” under the direction of conductor Hideaki Hirai at Aratani Theatre on Aug. 22. (Courtesy of Hideaki Hirai. © Ichiro Shimizu)

Japanese language opera blasts off at Aratani Theatre as U.S. Premiere

By John D. Swain

Through his Opera “Kaguya-hime” (*Princess from the Moon*), composer, librettist, conductor, and director Hideaki Hirai has created a fusion of East and West that goes beyond the historical and cultural roots of a beloved Japanese folktale and the richness of a modern Western-style musical score.

This opera, which received its U.S. premiere on Aug. 22 at the Aratani Theatre, Los Angeles, blends a traditional Japanese story and Western music into a piece that is sure to energize interest in both Japanese culture and Western opera across cultures and generations.

The role of Princess Kaguya, the “Princess from the Moon,” sung with warmth and grace by soprano Nobuko Takahashi, is the central character of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori monogatari*).

Hirai’s opera brings this 10th century Japanese folk-narrative to life in the 21st century. The four principal roles, Princess Kaguya (Takahashi), the Mikado (the Emperor, Katsuji Miura), Okina (an old bamboo cutter, Toshihiro Tachibana), and Ohna (Okina’s wife, Hiromi Morota), were sung by Japanese artists with international reputations.

Japanese is their native tongue; therefore, the musicality of the text could be naturally enhanced. However, Hirai’s awareness of and respect for the musicality of the language was most evident in the roles sung by non-Japanese-speaking performers.

The carefully crafted match between the musical score and the musicality of the language enhanced comprehension of the sung text even for audience members, such as this reviewer, who only speak Japanese as a second language. This correspondence between language

and music is one of the greatest achievements of this piece.

The international cast was also especially suitable for an American premier in multi-cultural Los Angeles. Cast members came from Japan, as well as Israel, Mexico, and the U.S., including the experienced Japanese American opera singer Steve Moritsugu.

Hirai’s deliberate choice to have a globally and culturally diverse cast reflected the diversity of the audience in attendance at the Aratani Theatre.

Lively characterizations created by the performers, however, were what really pulled the audience into the piece.

Toshihiro Tachibana’s comic turn as Okina, the old bamboo cutter, often drew gratified laughter and empathy from the audience. Roberto Esquivel-zeta’s playful presence as Prince Ishizukuri, Master of the Bamboo Flute, always brought levity to the events on stage.

This was an ambitious piece to stage at the mid-sized Aratani Theatre. Neither the stage, nor the orchestra pit was designed for a full-scale opera, however; Hirai (who also directed) and the designers worked effectively with the spatial limits, paring down the orchestra into a small ensemble of about fourteen musicians.

A few platforms and computer lighting projections on the back wall of stage established dramatic locations. On the one hand, the relatively restricted stage space was an impediment because the large chorus over-packed the stage at times, making it difficult for the entire audience to see some actions, such as Princess Kaguya’s final dramatic ascent back to the moon.

On the other hand, the intimate nature of the Aratani stage and auditorium created a close, pleasing connection



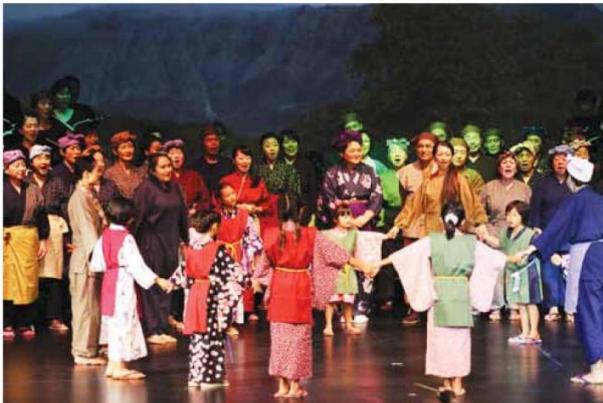
“Kaguya Hime” Los Angeles stage is produced by Yasumasa Tanano (left) in Los Angeles, and conductor Hideaki Hirai. (Cultural News Photo)

between the performers and audience for the arias, duets and recitatives. The most theatrically effective moment of the production was the Second Act Intermezzo when the lone Princess Kaguya gazed longingly at the full moon rising at the back of the stage.

One of Hirai’s narrative innovations, one particularly suited to the standard operatic structure, was the addition of the character Sato-no-musume (A beautiful village maiden), sung charmingly by Manami Sugimori.

The viewers in Los Angeles who had the privilege of viewing and listening to this well-crafted American premier production of Opera, “Kaguya-hime” (*Princess from the Moon*), can have the satisfaction of knowing they witnessed a singular cultural event that can only further strengthen ties between Japan, the Japanese American community in L.A., and the rest of the world. And the moon.

John D. Swain is a theatre critic, scholar, and translator of Japanese performance and culture. Currently an instructor at USC, he has taught Japanese theatre and culture at UC, Irvine, LMU, and CSU Fullerton.



Including 16 singers from Japan, opera “Kaguya Hime” are sung by 90 members of Kaguya Hime L.A. Chorus at Aratani Theatre. (Courtesy of Hideaki Hirai. © Ichiro Shimizu)