

MUSICAL MISSION POSSIBLE

Daniel Matsukawa sings out for lyrical bassoon playing

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

Daniel Matsukawa was lead guitar and lead screamer in a punk-rock band during the 1980's. He was about 12 years old. "I thought that was it. That was going to be my life," he said.

Some 25 years later, he was giving an interview in a dressing room below the stage of the Mann Music Center, shortly before his concert — with the Philadelphia Orchestra, as principal bassoon, a position he's held for six years.

What happened? He was instantly charmed by the bassoon, which he heard on the radio one day. "I loved the sound, and I found it so appealing," Mr. Matsukawa said. "I really was drawn to it."

Call it fate or serendipity. His parents were supportive, and, within a year or so, his guitar fell silent.

As his bassoon studies continued, he wanted to apply to Curtis to pursue its tradition of "refined" wind playing. There were no openings for two years, so he stayed at Juilliard (where he had attended precollege) until he could audition. By then his musical goal was set. On his Curtis application, he stated: "I have numerous goals as a musician, the most important of which is to become the best musician I can possibly be. My more tangible goals include performing actively as a soloist, chamber musician, and principal bassoonist in a major orchestra."

Ever since graduating from Curtis with a bachelor's degree in 1992, he's been principal in an orchestra. First it was a year in Memphis, then Virginia (twice), St. Louis, and on to Washington, D.C., for three seasons with the National Symphony before winning the Philadelphia Orchestra audition to succeed his Curtis teacher, Bernard Garfield.

At first friends harangued him for not taking auditions for second bassoon openings with bigger orchestras. He told them he'd rather be paid less to play what was right for him: principal. "It's not a snobby thing," he said. "I just knew that playing principal was what I really wanted to do."

Second bassoon, he said, requires a different mindset. "You almost always have to stay underneath, and be in a more supportive role

and quite transparent," said Mr. Matsukawa about the second part, with its demand for low notes played quietly and perfectly in tune.

Considering himself one player on an all-star team, he respects his colleagues throughout the orchestra. "This is all a collaboration. And we're all just musicians, trying to make music together. We're always serious, yet it's always fun."

THE LYRICAL BASSOON

Part of the attraction of principal parts is solo lines. "I know that brings me joy, to get to sing out," he said. Singing is a cornerstone of Mr. Matsukawa's musicianship. His earliest performances were as a member of a boys' choir. Harold Goltzer, his teacher at Juilliard, encouraged him to study Callas and Fischer-Dieskau and to go to the Metropolitan Opera.

It also explains his favorite type of bassoon music: lyrical. For example, there's Weber's operatic bassoon concerto, which he performed to great acclaim with the Philadelphia Orchestra this past season. "I feel like I can sing my heart out," he said about the concerto.

Mr. Matsukawa would like people to forget the bouncy, clownish characteristic of so much bassoon music, even as he acknowledges the instrument's ability to play immediate, short notes. "My favorite compliment," he said, "is when someone tells me it doesn't sound like a bassoon. It sounds like a voice, or it sounds like — whatever.

"And that's my ultimate compliment, as well, to other people. It's when they make me forget what kind of instrument they're playing. Sometimes I'll hear Dick Woodhams play something," he said of the orchestra's principal oboe, "and it's so beautiful, and he really makes me forget what instrument he's playing. Because the music-making, the phrasing, everything is just so compelling that I don't think at all about the oboe. So when people say that to me, that means the world to me."

He shares that view with his Curtis students as he teaches major lessons and coaches woodwind chamber groups. (He joined the chamber music faculty in 2002 and the major faculty in 2004.) Many young musicians

seem to strive to play quickly, densely, he has observed, likening it to fitting as many notes into a square inch as possible. Such dazzling technique is not the point. "It should only facilitate being able to express yourself," he said.

THE EXPRESSIVE ARTIST

"If you practice all the time and master your instrument, call yourself a great instrumentalist — a great bassoonist, a great pianist, a great violinist. If you learn how to phrase musically, and understand the musical structure of pieces and so forth, you call yourself a good musician. But," Mr. Matsukawa said, "until that person out there listening gets some kind of goose bumps one way or the other, through joy or sorrow, then don't call yourself an artist."

He applies that philosophy to auditions. Auditions are not about getting a job as much as they are about making music, almost like a recital, he tells his students. He encourages them to focus on musical mission. "If you think, 'Job-hungry. Job-hunting,' then that will end up coming through," he said. "You should think about the music, not winning or losing."

When he's on the hiring side of the audition screen, this is his view: "At the end of the day, I want us to get the person who's the best artist, who has something to say."

Mr. Matsukawa remembers "musical mission" himself before playing an orchestral solo. Listening to the music around him carries him into his own part. "You're there to express yourself and make music," he said.

There's another technique that he shares with students who say they played a passage much better when practicing at home than in their private lesson. That's because they were too comfortable, he tells them. "What you need to do is learn how to practice when you're *not* comfortable. Which is what we have to do anyway. Few people feel completely at home on stage all the time. It's hard to simulate that in your living room."

His suggestion: "Pretend there's an old master looking over your shoulder while you're

practicing. And then not much time is wasted. When I come across a little bump in the road, then I'll say, "What if someone was here, watching over my shoulder?" And suddenly it changes your perspective on things."

A PLAYFUL LIFE

The practice room and the old master need to be balanced, though, by the larger world. Mr. Matsukawa sometimes gets into trouble when other teachers hear the advice he gives at master classes: catch a movie, go to a museum, read. Not time spent idly, these experiences help shape the individual who will be expected to say something through his or her music.

"What are you going to reflect if all you know are the four walls that you've surrounded yourself with? That cave? And you're going to sound like a practice machine," he said. "Music is a reflection of life. So, what feelings do you have to express? You have to go out and experience joy and pain, sorrow, love. Everything."

His own pursuits include spending time with his family, which includes his wife, Hiroko, and their one- and three-year-old daughters. They speak Japanese at home so that the girls will be bilingual.

When they're a little older, Mr. Matsukawa may take them to sporting events, another passion of his. In fact, if he weren't a musician, he would likely be in baseball. "When I was a little kid," he said, "all I wanted to do some day was play for a major league baseball team." He's fond of basketball, too. And he became a football fan — an Eagles fan — while he was a student at Curtis.

Mr. Matsukawa plays sports occasionally. "People are always saying, 'Well, you're a musician. Watch your fingers and watch your chops.' But again, I think if we're more careful, we're probably more prone to injuries. I don't want to say I live recklessly. I don't. I just try to enjoy and savor."

A SPECIAL QUARTET

This season he will be enjoying the musical company of some Curtis friends as they perform on the Alumni Recital Series. Fellow Philadelphia Orchestra members Lisa-Beth Lambert (Violin '93), Burchard Tang (Viola '99), and Yumi Kendall (Violoncello '04) will join him in performing Bernard Garfield's quartets. Christoph Eschenbach is also on the program, as guest pianist.

Mr. Matsukawa loved the soulful musical language of Mr. Garfield's 1950 quartet and wished there were others. But Mr. Garfield had stopped composing when he joined the orchestra in 1957. He retired in 2000, and Mr. Matsukawa kept nagging him for another piece.

Finally Mr. Garfield relented, and the resulting suite was premiered by the same group for the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society last November. Then they asked for a third one; after all, Danzi and Devienne had each written three quartets. This time Mr. Garfield didn't need to be prodded. The latest composition is expected to be on the Alumni Recital Series program on January 21, and the quartet will probably record all three of them sometime.

"It means a lot, not just to me, but to bassoon players and other musicians," Mr. Matsukawa said about the new compositions. "I've heard so many comments after that debut in November, that his music really reaches out to them, and it touches them. I can see Garfield beaming. His eyes just smiling. And he said to us after, 'I'm really glad you pushed me.'"

Mr. Matsukawa considers Mr. Garfield to be like a second father. "When I play a piece that he wrote, and dedicated to me, it doesn't get any better. People say, 'Well, we play like our personalities.' And I find the same for composers: They write like their personalities. His beautiful personality comes through with his music."

Lyrical playing, then, should be no surprise from the bassoon of Mr. Matsukawa, a musician whose joy is singing out and whose philosophies of music and life make both sweeter. ☺

Daniel Matsukawa coaches a woodwind sextet in fall 2005 ~ PHOTO: JEAN BRUBAKER

