

Chapter 12

Dreaming of Wagner: Opera in Japan, Gluck, and the Aspiration for a 'National Theatre'

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The Japanese first encountered opera after 1854, following the termination of their isolation policy (*Sakoku*). Opera was welcomed as part of a politico-cultural agenda to modernise their country through Westernisation. In so doing, they aspired to a musico-theatrical genre in imitation of Wagnerian ideals but in the Japanese language, that would form the basis of a 'National Theatre'.

This chapter explores their attempts to realise this project in the early twentieth century. First, it will trace the dissemination in Japan of Wagner's discourses on musical theatre. Then it will examine intense discussions among Japanese intellectuals concerning how to realise the German composer's ideals in the Japanese language and context, and assess their experimental musico-theatrical products generated from the debates.

Second, I will discuss in detail the first opera performance by an all-Japanese cast at Japan's earliest state conservatoire in 1903. The performance was instigated by the Wagnerian Society founded by intellectuals at the University of Tokyo. The chosen work was Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, a substitute for their original over-ambitious plan of mounting *Tannhäuser*. The moderate success of the Gluck premiere proved historic in Japan's reception of opera, giving a glimmer of hope towards a National Theatre. Even so, the conservatoire immediately banned further operatic performances fearing that overt displays of amorous gestures in educational settings might incite women to sexual immodesty. Hence, only commercial organisations performed opera, which eventually created 'vulgarised' forms of Western opera, somewhat unique in Japan but distant from Wagnerian music theatre – much to the chagrin of the intellectuals.

Through examining such a cultural dissonance between the 'high and low' and Western and Eastern mores, this chapter explores the modification of operatic genres and meanings involved in the transfer of artworks from one society to another.