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Tokyo gets new wave of concert halls

Hiroschi Miyashita / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

Two music universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area opened their own concert halls in the spring. Smaller concert halls also were established by individuals in Tokyo and Nagoya to provide venues for chamber music and give musicians and audiences alike more opportunities to enjoy music.

Municipal governments were once keen on enhancing their image by building concert halls, but this trend came to an end in the face of financial difficulties and the merging of cities, towns and villages. Private companies' philanthropic activities in this field, once significant, also have declined in recent years. In this environment, concert halls built by private individuals and other organizations are beginning to become prominent.

Showa University of Music opened the Teatro del Giglio Accademia Musicae Showa concert hall at the end of April. For the university, the opening was a landmark event marking the transfer of its campus to Kawasaki from Atsugi in Kanagawa Prefecture.

The university is noted for the training of vocalists, and has close relations with the Fujiwara Opera company. The new facility is a full-fledged theater that can even handle opera performances. The three-level, 1,367-seat hall is horseshoe-shaped in the orthodox European style. "We used this style since it puts the performing space as close as possible to audience seats. It also provides acoustic advantages," said Kyosuke Shimoyagawa, director of Showa Accademia Musicae, which runs the university.

The university also takes pride in the fact that the stage and stage equipment storage space were expanded compared to the previous hall, and state-of-the-art stage machinery was introduced. One of the roles of the hall will be to provide a venue where students can show off the fruits of their studies. "We want this hall to be a place where young talent is nurtured," Shimoyagawa said.

Tokyo College of Music, which is celebrating the 100th anniversary of its founding in Toshima Ward, Tokyo, has rebuilt a core school building and established an 806-seat concert hall to mark this special year. A commemorative event was held on May 1.

Since the school is located in a densely built-up area close to Ikebukuro, university official Kenichi Kijima says it focuses on providing students with an environment where they can freely practice without causing a disturbance in the neighborhood. The four-story glass-walled building with one basement floor creates an open impression. It houses 64 sound-proof practice rooms.

The hall was built on a square shoebox-plan which is said to ensure excellent acoustics. "Playing at a decent hall is a good opportunity for students and provides them with great experience," Kijima said. The university is planning to hold a lecture for amateur orchestras based in the ward, and will conduct public programs at the hall.

Since music universities, like all universities, face a life-or-death struggle to secure students in the

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face of a declining birthrate, building new concert halls has apparently become one way to tackle the problem.

Meanwhile, the construction of concert halls by private parties has also attracted attention of late.

At the end of March, Munetsugu Hall was established in Naka Ward, Nagoya. Tokuji Munetsugu, who achieved success operating a chain of curry stores, spent more than 2 billion yen of his own money to build the facility in the hope of making a positive contribution to society.

Munetsugu withdrew from the business frontline five years ago and set up a nonprofit organization to support welfare, sports and art activities. Munetsugu said he came to hope to nurture artists--a process he compares to watering flowers--after organizing some small concerts at his home.

The 310-seat hall is the result. While hoping the reputation of the hall will spread by word of mouth, Munetsugu has launched a competition to nurture young violinists. "I want young people to find a tune which can change their life. It is really hard to make profits by operating a hall. I'm going to commit to sowing seeds this and next year," he said.

In Suginami Ward, Tokyo, the 100-seat concert hall Sonorium opened in April.

It is located in a residential area, so particular attention was paid to sound insulation. The ceiling of the hall is nearly six meters high, while the flooring is made of 200-year-old Japanese red pine that had been used as beams in an old house.

Shizuyo Kusunoki runs the hall while also running her own advertising company.

"There are many good artists who maybe can't pack a large hall. There also is a particular kind of sound you can only enjoy in a small venue. So I always thought there should be this kind of venue--a place where artists can try out their skills in a relaxed way," says Kusunoki, who points out that such halls still are common in Europe.

"Music is something that can really help when you are going through difficult times. I hope I can do something with the hall that can't be done with bigger venues," Kusunoki said.

(Jun. 16, 2007)

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