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Toshiyuki Shimada – Maestro of the Shoreline

Tom Soboleski

Steeped in classical music, his only real ambition was to conduct a symphony orchestra. A native of Japan, he is grateful to have had one of the best mentors an aspiring conductor could wish for. Now directing orchestras on both ends of the shoreline, Toshiyuki Shimada also teaches conducting at Yale. But Toshi, as he's known, is far from parochial. He's looking forward to conducting the Istanbul Philharmonic in Turkey in November. He spends a lot of time in Vienna recording new works. Coastal caught up with him fresh from a vacation in Watch Hill, full of vigor and preparing for his eighth season as music director of the Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra in New London and 13th season leading Yale's symphony.

When did you know you were going to be a conductor?

When I was 11. I was singing in the boys choir in Tokyo. I was just amazed watching the conductor direct and everybody following. And I said, wow, this is incredible. So I asked my choir director, may I conduct the orchestra? And he said you don't know how to conduct, do you? And I said, no, will you teach me? He was a little hesitant but I was insistent. He finally gave in and he gave me a piece to conduct. So I went home and studied, start moving my arms. Then I went to the rehearsal and it worked. Everyone was following me! I thought this is great! So then he let me conduct the concert, 11 years old. And I got hooked on it.

Who was most influential on who you are now as a conductor?

Leonard Bernstein. He used to guest conduct with Houston and I used to accompany him (Shimada was associate director of the Houston Symphony for six seasons). Just watching him rehearse, that's a lesson in itself. I learned from him a great deal. Also, to be a great musician you have to be a wonderful human being, and he was.

Who is your favorite composer and why?

Mozart is my most favorite because he's so pure. The music flows naturally without any crafting. Bach created like a carpenter with a plan. But Mozart didn't have to, he just wrote it out, without self-analyzing. Beethoven revised things a lot. Mozart hardly revised his music. He had such a gift that I don't think will ever appear on this earth again. The next level is Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky.

Is there a contemporary classical composer who really impresses you?

Aaron Jay Kernis. He's becoming a really respected American composer. I like his music very much; it's so deep. It speaks to you. It's very soulful. There are also many wonderful women composers now. Every season at ECSO I've been introducing a woman composer, sometimes two or three.

Have you noticed changes in the ECSO over your seven years?

The orchestra's sound has finally become my sound. I wanted to have some imprint on my orchestra. When I got here it was good but missing a few things. I think from my first year until now it's quite different.

What is that imprint?

First, the sound is excellent. There's a higher performance level with fewer mistakes. The intonation is much better, the blending is much better. And the important thing is that the morale of the players is very high. They tell me they love being here, so that's a compliment. I worked on it very hard and demanded a higher artistic level from each player.

What advice do you have for young aspiring conductors?

I always push my students to be in front of live musicians as much as they need to so they can practice their skills. And to practice using your arms, your face, your eyes, expressions. And learn as much as possible about human life. Psychology, philosophy, other arts, sociology, all those things. The reason is because our music is so many different types of emotions, sometimes tragedy, sometimes joy, etc.

So what is a guilty pleasure of Toshi Shimada?

I like eating many different cuisines from all over the world. And also cooking. I love cooking. I do Turkish dishes. My specialty may be Asian but I love cooking Italian. I do Slovak dishes. I make great Hungarian goulash. When cooking Japanese, I like sukiyaki.