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Mini-On: To begin, please tell us about your background and how your musical career developed.

David Amoo: I was born near the Ghanaian capital of Accra in a village called Avenor, which is famous for traditional music and dance. In fact, I was born into a great family of musicians and artists skilled in drumming, dancing and singing, so I have always been surrounded by music and dance, and this inspired the development of my own musical career. Eventually, at the age of 30, I joined the school of performing arts at the University of Ghana. When the National Theatre was established in 1992, I began working there as a stage director. I took up my current position as artistic director five years ago, in 2007.

Mini-On: The Ensemble’s performance was superb in terms of its artistic quality and technique, but it was also a very energetic expression of joy and the spirit of life in Africa.

Amoo: Our performance is not like an elegant ballet or modern dance; rather, it is the dance of the people, representing the lives and traditions of different tribes and communities in Ghana. During the period of European colonization of Ghana, the colonial government prohibited Ghanaian traditions of dance and music, and instead we were encouraged to sing hymns. So for a long time, we could not hold any traditional ceremonies to enjoy our own music and dance. But after Ghana won its independence, our first president worked to bring our traditional cultures together, bringing different people together to form a unified nation of Ghana. The roots of our dance company go back to this time. Since then, our company has had a tradition of gathering talented young artists who show mastery of particular dance forms from different regions of Ghana, and training them to express a variety of dance traditions from Ghana and other parts of Africa.

Mini-On: You are a choreographer as well as a master drum maker. Do you know how many types of dance and drums actually exist in Ghana?

Amoo: I’ve never counted how many, but there are a lot—and even more in Africa as a whole. The type of drum played is determined by where a particular dance form comes from. Ghana has ten major regions across the country, and each region has its own unique tradition of dance and accompanying drums. The region where I come from alone has more than 50 distinct dance forms, so we selected only a few important and special dances from...
concluded with splendid success at the city of Nasu-Shiobara in Tochigi prefecture on September 15.

On the evening of September 13, toward the end of their musical voyage in Japan, the Ensemble took to the stage of Nakano Sun Plaza Hall for their Tokyo premiere, an event that was enjoyed by a capacity audience that included Ghanaian ambassador Dr. William G. M. Brandful, as well as many other ambassadors and diplomats from 21 countries. The Ensemble’s performance featured a wide range of music and dance from the Republic of Ghana, and included a medley of songs and dances unique to various ethnic groups and regions. For example, Ahengoro, which means “music of loyalty,” was performed at the beginning of the show. It is an expression of loyalty to local dignitaries or chiefs at ceremonial events among the ethnic Akans in the Southern Region of Ghana. Atsea is a dance that brings youth together at social events for celebrations throughout Ghana, while Jira is a dance characteristic of Islamic hunters from the Ghana’s Northern Region. A total of more than a dozen styles of ethnic songs and dances were performed as a medley in two parts, and during the finale, the entire Ensemble performed a medley from their repertoire of original modern African dances known as Soleokor, with acrobatic movements redolent of the spirit of Africa drawing enthusiastic and extended applause. At a commemorative reception held immediately after the performance, the ambassadors and distinguished guests from various countries, together with the members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, celebrated the magnificent cultural flowers that bloomed onstage for the African Century.

Min-On: Another unique characteristic of your performance was that the performers were dancing even while singing and playing drums. It seems to be a natural part of daily life for the Ghanaian people.

Amoo: As Africans, it is very natural for us to sing and dance whenever and wherever we go. That is obvious when you see how we watch a soccer game—enthusiastically cheering while playing drums and singing and dancing. We are not a quiet people! Singing and dancing is a natural part of our lives right from birth. A mother carries her baby on her back and sings and dances all the time—even at a funeral—so the baby naturally senses the rhythm from her body and this is imbed deep into the child’s own life. In particular, song is a very important means of communication in Ghana, so everybody sings. People celebrate the positive by singing, but they also protest against the negative by singing. So our challenge was to transform those songs and dances from day-to-day life into a style for presentation on stage.

Min-On: As the artistic director, what are the challenges in pursuing your company’s goals?

Amoo: Since its establishment, the company has been financially supported by the government. But while we have sufficient funds to maintain our activities within Ghana, we cannot afford to travel abroad and tour independently. We therefore deeply appreciate the Min-On Concert Association sponsoring us and making this Japan tour possible. Our first president, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, established the company to promote cultural activities with a view to making Ghana one nation and Africa one union. Thus, I deeply respect and admire Dr. Ikeda’s vision of establishing the Min-On Concert Association with the same purpose in mind, of promoting cultural exchange on a global scale. He has such a brilliant mind and so much wisdom, and he has entered into dialogues with many different people around the world, as well as writing many books to share his vision and wisdom for world peace. Indeed, Min-On is the dream of all artists, and I believe it is the only organization today to fulfill the dreams and promises of performing artists around the world. I knew only a little about the role of cultural activities before, but I learned a great deal from Min-On through this Japan tour, and now I am determined to take this knowledge back home to share with more people for the sake of the future of Africa.
Tokyo International Music Competition Opens a Gateway to Success as a Conductor

The Min-On Concert Association, in cooperation with the Association of Japanese Symphony Orchestras, held the 16th Tokyo International Music Competition for Conducting at the Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall for an entire week from October 29 through November 4. The event was cosponsored by Asahi Breweries, Ltd., and supported by the Foreign Ministry of Japan, the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and Japan Broadcasting Corporation.

The Tokyo International Music Competition for Conducting—one category of the Tokyo International Music Competition, which included competitions for vocalists, conductors, chamber ensembles, as well as contemporary composers and choreographers—was launched in 1967 as the Min-On Competition for Conducting, and has since been held every three years with the aim of discovering and encouraging talented conductors to contribute to the advancement of music culture around the world. Through the cooperation of many outstanding individuals in the world of classical music and the involvement of world-famous conductors such as Hideo Saito, Takashi Asahina, Seiji Ozawa, Yuzo Toyama, the Competition has gained an international reputation among aspiring conductors as a gateway to worldwide success.

This year marks the 16th competition for conducting and the event’s 45th anniversary. A total of 180 talented young people from 29 countries and regions submitted applications, and after rigorous screening by the nominating committee in June this year, 24 individuals from nine countries (one each from Austria, Israel, Korea, Poland, Russia, the Slovak Republic, Taiwan and the United States, and 16 from Japan) were invited to participate in the first preliminary round, which was held on the first two days of the Competition. Each contestant conducted the New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra playing 20 minutes of Beethoven’s Symphony No.1 before a panel of judges composed of nine preeminent conductors and academics from Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Japan and Russia.

After the judging was complete, seven of the 24 challengers were selected to advance to the second preliminary round, with each contestant conducting three required pieces—Stravinsky: Concerto in D for string orchestra, Chopin: Piano Concerto No.2, and Sibelius: Symphony No.1. After two full days of performances with the New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, it took the panel of judges an hour of deliberation and discussion to select the three finalists: Mayana Ishizaki from Japan, Yuko Tanaka from Japan, and Maja Metelska from Poland.

After two further days of practice with the internationally acclaimed Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, the final round of the competition was held on Sunday, November 4 at the magnificent concert hall of Tokyo Opera City. In the first half of the final session, each of the three finalists conducted the same designated piece, Weber’s Overture for Opera ‘Euryanthe’, creating striking contrasts with each other in their expression.

In the final section of the competition, the finalists conducted a piece of their own choosing submitted at the time of application. Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 3 ‘Scottish’ was selected by Yuko Tanaka; Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 ‘Eloica’ was chosen by Maja Metelska; and Dvorak: Symphony No. 8 was nominated by Mayana Ishizaki. Each composition was sensitively and skillfully conducted, and each finalist drew applause from the audience.

The weeklong 16th Tokyo International Music Competition 2012 concluded with an awards ceremony attended by all members of the judging panel, representatives of the cosponsor and supporting organizations, as well as by officials of the New Japan Philharmonic and Tokyo Symphony orchestras. Although no one took first, second or third prizes in the competition due to the extremely rigorous judging criteria, the special Hideo Saito Award went to Maja Metelska, and the Audience Award was presented to Mayana Ishizaki. The Encouragement Award and Honorable Mention title were awarded all three finalists.

At the Press Conference held on Monday, November 5, Saito Award winner Maja Metelska commented, “It was a rare and valuable experience to be able to conduct these internationally acclaimed orchestras—both the New Japan Philharmonic and Tokyo Symphony Orchestra. I am very grateful to the jury for giving me this opportunity and for awarding me the special prize of the late maestro Hideo Saito, a conductor I hold in the highest regard. I hope that this competition will open up future possibilities in my conducting career.”
On the autumn evening of October 12 in Tokyo, The Battle 2012—an international street dance competition—broke out between a group of Russian dancers known as Predatorz Crew and a Japanese alliance of young dancing forces in front of an enthusiastic crowd gathered at Nakano Sun Plaza Hall in Tokyo, with the Russian team claiming victory.

Street dancing—commonly known as hip-hop dancing or breakdancing—has been a mainstay of modern urban culture since the end of the 20th century. In the 1970s, a variety of freestyle dancing evolved on the streets of New York City, and has flourished among young people across the United States and eventually around the world in the new millennium. Early on in its history, constant improvisation created new and exciting styles, including hip-hop, breaking, popping, locking, gliding and waving among many others, and made street dance a truly fun, exciting and inspirational experience for many youths and street gangs in urban areas. Instead of violent fights, street dancers started to compete with each other, showing off their individual techniques; these competitions have developed into today’s ‘battles’. Although battles are still competitive, the interaction and collaboration that occurred on the streets brought many youths together with a deep sense of solidarity that crossed barriers of geography, language and race, and created spaces for the globalization of urban culture.

To develop mutual understanding and friendship among the youth of different countries, Min-On initiated The Battle series to bring a street dance competition to the stage, and invited groups of dancers from Korea and China to Japan on three occasions in 2007, 2009 and 2010. This year, the world-champion breakdance group, Predatorz Crew, was invited from Moscow, Russia to collaborate with a team of popular Japanese hip-hop dancers for a 19-city tour of The Battle across Japan from October 12 through November 6. In part one of the event, each team introduced its own unique moves to rhythms supplied by DJ Mar Ski, which were judged by the applause of the audience. During the finale, the teams performed a collaborative production entitled Aiming for a New Era Above the Clouds, sketching a plot in which an age of war turns to an age of solidarity. The teams celebrated together the great triumph of The Battle 2012 with the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

Min-On President Hiroyasu Kobayashi received the certificate on Mr. Ikeda’s behalf.

On the morning of October 23, a delegation of the Betawi Cultural Institute (LKB) from Indonesia, headed by its chairman, H. Tatang Hidayat, paid a courtesy visit to the Min-On Culture Center in Tokyo.

Indonesia is home to more than 500 ethnic groups, and its cultural diversity is unparalleled in Southeast Asia. Among those ethnic groups, the Betawi are the descendants of people living around Batavia (the colonial name for Jakarta). They have their own unique culture in terms of song, dance, music, and other traditions. At the beginning of a formal meeting during the visit, Mr. Hidayat remarked that the Betawi Cultural Institute was established for the purposes of not only preserving Betawi culture but also promoting harmonious coexistence with other cultures in Indonesia and fostering friendly relations with foreign cultures. He expressed his deep admiration of Min-On’s remarkable record of global cultural exchanges, and extended his sincere gratitude for this significant opportunity of introducing Betawi culture to Japan.

After enjoying a tour of the Min-On Music Museum, the delegation visited the Soka University in Hachioji and held a Japan-Indonesia goodwill concert with performances of ethnic music and traditional dance at the student center on the campus. After the performance, the Institute bestowed “The Highest Commendation for an Honorable Cultural Figure” upon Min-On founder Daisaku Ikeda in honor of his contribution to promoting cultural exchange and world peace. Min-On President Hiroyasu Kobayashi received the certificate on Mr. Ikeda’s behalf.
In Ghana, the concept of the formation of cultural institutions and groups like the Ghana Dance Ensemble goes back to the time of our founding fathers.
entertaining and enjoyable performances that represent African musical culture, and I am proud that as cultural ambassadors of Ghana they have enriched the cultural ties between Ghana and Japan.

Min-On: What do you think is the significance of the kind of international cultural exchange promoted by the Min-On Concert Association for the last half century?

Ambassador: I can confidently say that cultural exchanges are very significant for any country. The Min-On Concert Association has proven this significance by consistently being involved over a long period in concert activities that include various fields of the performing arts, and at the same time the Association has organized countless cultural exchanges with many different countries. Min-On even sponsors whole tours from beginning to end, such as this one for the Ghana Dance Ensemble. It is for us—especially as we have come all the way from Africa—very significant to be able to introduce African culture to Japanese people, and obviously it is beneficial for our country to increase understanding of Ghana in Japan. I have monitored the progress of this tour so as to look after the members of the Dance Ensemble during their visit to Japan, and have found that everybody in the troupe is very happy and appreciative of the kind way that Min-On has taken care of everyone, and also how Min-On has professionally organized the tour logistics. All that consideration, and the care given to minute details, made possible the realization of such a successful performance tour by the Ghana Dance Ensemble in Japan. Once again, I reiterate my deepest appreciation of Min-On and, at the same time, I hope it will be possible to have other collaborations between Min-On and the Ghana Dance Ensemble in the future. Both Ghana as a country and the Dance Ensemble as an institution know that we still have many things to learn from Japan; therefore, we hope this bridge of friendship built by Min-On and the Dance Ensemble will bring ever-closer cooperation between Japan and Ghana for the future of Africa.

From the Editor

» Every year since 1983, Min-On Founder, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, has written and published a peace proposal that is submitted to the United Nations. In a portion of his 2001 proposal, entitled Creating and Sustaining a Century of Life: Challenges for a New Era published at the beginning of this new century, he wrote about Africa as follows:

» “Africa is the birthplace of humankind. It has been a continent of hope, giving rise to a rich diversity of civilizations since ancient times, which have given humanity numerous blessings in many areas, including philosophy and science. It has long been my belief that the twenty-first century must be the century of Africa. This conviction is in part rooted in the experience of my first visit to the UN Headquarters in 1960. There, I witnessed and was deeply impressed by the energy and vitality of the African delegates participating in the General Assembly and various committee meetings. Indeed, 1960 was an extraordinary year for Africa, with seventeen African nations winning their independence. From that time I began to develop friendships with the political, cultural, and intellectual leaders of various African countries, hoping to contribute to the realization of a century of Africa. Moreover, as the founder of Soka University and the Min-On Concert Association, I have been actively engaged in promoting broad educational and cultural exchange at the grassroots level.”

From the Min-On Music Museum Collection

“Bologna” Harpsichord
1680s, Bologna, Italy
The harpsichord is a keyboard instrument that produces its distinctive sound by plucking a string when a key is pressed. The earliest harpsichord designs date from the late Middle Ages—well before the invention of the fortepiano in the early 1700s.

The “Bologna” Harpsichord was produced around 1680. Several paintings in the Venetian style were later added, along with the beautifully built and carved rococo stand. The use of the Japanese lacquer style in the paintings, evident in the brilliant red coloration, makes this perhaps the most ornately decorated harpsichord in the world.

Min-On’s “Bologna” Harpsichord is now displayed in the newly opened Western Japan Branch of the Min-On Music Museum in Kobe, and played for the museum visitors to enjoy the same graceful sounds as were heard from the instrument more than three centuries ago.

About The Min-On Music Museum and Music Library

The Min-On Culture Center is home to the Min-On Music Museum and Music Library. The collection includes more than 120,000 vinyl records, CDs, and DVDs, as well as 45,000 musical scores and 33,000 reference books and other materials, all of which are freely available. On display in the museum are a number of antique harpsichords and classical pianos, various music boxes and gramophones, and a variety of ethnic instruments collected from around the world. The museum also hosts various special exhibitions and cultural activities on different musical themes. Entrance to the museum is free of charge.

The Min-On Concert Association Celebrates the People’s Music

The Min-On Concert Association was founded in 1963 by Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International, as a nonprofit, independent nondenominational organization to promote the global exchange of musical culture. Min-On aims to develop mutual understanding and respect among people of different races and nationalities. In 1965 it became an incorporated foundation, which is now supported by more than one million sustaining members nationwide. Min-On literally means “people’s music,” and its aim is to share the joy of music and to unite people through shared emotion, thus creating an ever-expanding circle of friendship among people around the world.

Today, Min-On sponsors some 1,100 performances each year, attracting a total audience of more than 1.5 million, and making available diverse music of high quality—from classical to modern, from popular to traditional—to as wide a range of music lovers as possible. Min-On also sponsors various musical programs, including free concerts in schools and the Tokyo International Music Competition to encourage the emotional development of young people and foster the growth of new talent.

Since its foundation, Min-On has hosted almost 75,000 cultural performances and concerts, with a total audience of more than 110 million. Through these various musical activities Min-On has successfully initiated cultural exchanges with 105 countries and regions around the world.

Come and Visit Us!

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Exhibit and Shop
Open: 11:00-16:00 (Tuesday-Saturday)
10:00-17:00 (Sunday & public holidays)
Closed: Every Monday (If Monday is a public holiday, next day is closed)

Music Library
Open: 11:00-18:30 (Tuesday, Thursday & Saturday)
(Closed on public holidays)
Closed: August 1-15, Year-end / New Year