

“Transnational” Art World. Career Patterns of Japanese Musicians in the European World of Classical Music

Japanese musicians arriving to Europe for the purpose of studies and work have become more and more visible in the context of classical art scenes, and they do not constitute a niche sample anymore. Their number has been steadily increasing in European music academies, music competitions and on classical stages in France, England and Germany or in Poland. This fact mirrors, for instance, the statistics of participants in the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition. Furthermore, Western connoisseurs of classical music are familiar with names of such renowned instrumentalists as Ebi Akiko, Uchida Mistuko or Goto Midori to list only a few prominent Japanese examples of this trend. Notwithstanding their presences in European world of classical music, the phenomenon of Japanese musicians is frequently associated with clichés, which circulate in Western artistic milieus and typecast the instrumentalists of Japanese origins as technically skilled performers, whose playing however, reveals their insufficient musicality. This sort of stereotypical representations divide musicians based on their ethnic origins into “authentic” European performers and their colleagues from Japan, for instance, who aspire to this title.

Interestingly, the issue of musicians’ socio-cultural origins (ethnicity) is absent from works on artistic professions. One reason, for which the studies on creative professions do not conceptualize ethnicity in career trajectories, stems from the fact that this approach tacitly precludes transnationality of the music milieu, which supposedly rests on the universality of its language, that in the case of music, is constituted by the system of notation, and French as well as Italian terminology. Nor have been careers paths of Japanese musicians systematically examined on grounds of sociology of labor migration heretofore, despite their ‘transitionality’ – these trajectories begin in Japan and then shift abroad to Europe at a certain point.

Given the above, the aim of this study was to fill in this gap. Combining two perspectives – that of the “art world” (represented by Becker, Buscatto, Coulangeon, Faulkner, Grazian, Heinich, Lahire, Lehman, Moulin, Peterson, Perrenoud, Ravet, Wagner, Westby etc.) on the one hand and that of labour mobility and migration (Beverstock, Boyle, Delcroix, Jungwirth, Kofman, Massey, Portes i Fernández-Kelly, Raghuram, Sayad, Scott, A. C. Wagner, I. Wagner etc.) on the other, – this thesis sheds light on the dynamics of Japanese musicians’ artistic careers establishing themselves in Europe in the context of “transnational” trajectories of skilled professionals. How do people, socialized in one particular culture, relocate to a disparate socio-cultural environment initially to study and eventually to build their professional as well as individual lives abroad? Shall these musicians be conceived of as “cosmopolite” artists? Or does the social construction of their careers bring them closer to “migrants”?

This study was based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with Japanese musicians in their mother tongue as well as 20 interviews/conversations led with experts/informers. Comparing two substantially disparate environments, the French and the Polish ones, I aimed at distilling the impact that various structural as well as socio-cultural environmental idiosyncrasies have on career dynamics.

In conclusion, examining modes of insertion into music education against the background of respondents' social origins led me to distinguish four main career trajectories: (1) professional heirs; (2) inheritors of parental dreams; (3) brass band alumni and (4) avocational practitioners. Furthermore, the collected material unveiled that musicians' professional biographies are multilayered and that the presupposed "transnationality" has been conditioned by a combination of various social factors (i.e., social origins; gender; specialization; education systems; possibilities of conversion of capital be it cultural or social; migration policies, labor markets as well as structure of the welfare state in the host countries), which largely influence, and in some cases, derail the studied vocational paths. For example, the collected material uncovered the way, in which these trajectories interrelate with the "normative gender order" that dominates Japanese society. It turned out that the gender task distribution not only affects musicians' careers at the early education stage, but also becomes one constitutive element that orients their path to Europe.

Answering the question about how it happens that the Japanese musicians accept their "European plight", I identified two main causes. Firstly, male musicians were prompted by professional emancipation, which I define as (1) the ability to find a stable position in the music world and (2) the recognition, which this musicianship enjoys in Europe as profession, despite the fact that it does not translate into economic rewards or rarely fulfils aesthetic expectations. Female musicians established their life in Poland and France having experienced socio-professional emancipation. In Europe, Japanese women did not have to compromise their professional aspirations under social pressure, as they would be expected back in their home country.

Notwithstanding the aspect of the conditioned socio-professional emancipation, the research material led me to question the "transnational" dimension of artistic vocation, which I associate rather with "double absence", a term coined by the French sociologists Abdelmalek Sayad. On the one hand, the non-EU citizenship of Japanese musicians emerged as an element that impeded the access the Japanese musicians had to the local labor market, consequently affecting their legal and vocational situation. On the other, being absent from the classical music milieu in Japan, the studied musicians were in no position to either build or maintain networks – which are the main channels of job distribution, – back there. In this sense, what they experienced, was "transnationality" in an opposite meaning of the term, namely as a "double absence".