

Calendar

Fast-Note Flurries

Japanese Guitar Orchestra

With anticipation — and some incredulity — MiraCosta College awaits the arrival of a phenom: the Matsusaka Commercial High School guitar orchestra from Japan.

Christy Coobatis, a music professor at the college who has played in guitar orchestras himself, seems pleasantly baffled by what he has seen and heard on the Matsusaka group's promotional video. "I don't get it. I don't know how they do it."

All guitar orchestras include instruments from highest pitched to lowest. This Japanese group does too. "Some play mandolins; some play these

big things called *guitarróns*.

Have you seen mariachi orchestras? The guy with the big

exploded guitar? They originated in Spain—all guitar-based instruments are Spanish. The *guitarrón* is most popular in Mexico." *Requintos*, *chembalos*, and bass guitars are other parts of the mix. There is no hierarchy. The melody is "swapped" among the various players, who create, according to Coobatis, a sound that's "lively, energetic, hypnotic, undulating." He searches for a metaphor, finally settling on butterfly wings. "It kind of flutters."

To those who don't associate guitars with Japan, he explains the orchestra's origins. "Slowly, classical Western music has been moving its way into Asia. There's a fascination with the whole culture. So they're playing some Giuliani [the Italian composer who lived around Beethoven's time] and some Rodrigo [the 20th-century Spanish composer]. And they're playing pop classics." Even Disney's "It's a Small World" is part of their repertoire. "We kind of leached our way into their culture." And now its being reflected back at us? "Exactly."

So, what's unique about the Japanese group? Its size. In the United States, guitar orchestras are normally 20 or 30 players. The one that Coobatis played with at Cal State Fullerton, while he was in graduate school, was 45 members. The Japanese group numbers 80.

More remarkable, he says, is the length of time it has taken them to master their instruments. A majority have been playing less than three years. Some began lessons only months before the group won Japan's national guitar-orchestra competition for which the prize was this tour.

Coobatis credits the group's



Part of the Matsusaka Commercial High School guitar orchestra

director-conductor, Yukio Nakanisha. "It's up to him to pick music that they can handle. But when you see these kids play? You wouldn't think there's anything they can't handle. They're rolling their notes; they're playing very complicated lines; they're playing Bach. If you closed your eyes, you wouldn't think it was kids up there."

As for Nakanisha's style, "He could easily be conducting the London Philharmonic. That's what it looks like. He's very precise. And if you watch him, you can see he's keeping track of everybody at the same time. He's definitely a major performer in this."

At MiraCosta, there's an 18-member guitar ensemble. Directed by Eric Foster, it includes students from the college as well as adults from the community, ranging in age from 30 to 75. They do two or three concerts each semester, at the college and in North County. Concertgoers, then, have the opportunity to compare east and west this season.

What impressed Foster, when he saw the video, was the Japanese group's

ability to play with unity and great speed. There were many "flurries of fast notes," he says — a technical tour de force. "It was actually entertaining just to watch them, because their gestures and their movements were so synchronized."

Like Coobatis, Foster acknowledges the importance of Nakanisha's role, knowing from experience how difficult arranging music for a guitar orchestra can be. A guitar orchestra has been compared to a choir of tenors, he says.

But it isn't true that all guitars are equal. Nor does playing one type well guarantee you can play others as successfully. "People forget the personality of the instrument," says Coobatis, who believes its "identity" should mesh with the player's. He regrets how often people choose their instrument by accident. "You just say, 'Oh, I like that. I want to play it.' You know when you see a person get a certain haircut or glasses, and it really doesn't suit them? With a musical instrument, you're committing a life to

it. And it takes some people a lifetime to figure out the instrument that's in touch with who they are. Some people never figure it out. It's too complicated for young people to do their own personality assessment." But many teachers fail to do it for them. "The teacher isn't intuitive enough to say, 'This student does things slow and sure, and this one does things haphazard and fast.'"

Does he think the Matsusaka guitar orchestra is so good because somebody picked the right instrument for each player?

"No," he ventures, "they must have transcended the whole issue with discipline."

—Jeanne Schinto

Matsusaka Commercial High School Guitar Orchestra
Friday, August 24, 7:30 p.m.
MiraCosta College Theatre
One Barnard Drive,
Oceanside
\$7; \$5 for students and seniors
Info: 760-795-6815

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