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tradition and innovation sing

The Tokyo Nihonkai Opera Theatre performs “Madama Butterfly” in Tokyo in 2024. MASAHIKO TERASHI

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Tokyo shines bright as a city gaining attention for groundbreaking opera collaborations

Working to grow audiences through international coproductions, expanding regional performances



The Tokyo Nikikai Opera Theatre performs a scene from “Die Frau ohne Schatten” in Tokyo against a backdrop of the city’s skyline in October 2024. MASAHIKO TERASHI



Renowned Director Peter Konwitschny issues directions for staging an international coproduction of “Die Frau ohne Schatten.” MAIKO MIYAGAWA

Manami Tominaga
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Since classical music arrived in Japan in the 19th century, Tokyo has evolved into one of the world’s premier music capitals. Today, the city is home to more than 10 professional orchestras and boasts first-rate venues such as the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan and the New National Theatre, Tokyo.

The NHK Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo, Japan’s leading orchestra, made history in 2025 by becoming the first from Asia to be invited to perform at the prestigious Mahler Festival in Amsterdam.

Opera, in particular, has developed remarkably through numerous coproductions with European theaters. The Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation, one of Japan’s leading opera companies, actively engages in international collaborations, frequently partnering with esteemed European companies and artists on productions that blend Asian and Western artistic sensibilities. Through these global partnerships and a commitment to nurturing singers and staging excellent performances, Tokyo Nikikai has established itself as a central player in Tokyo’s classical music scene.

International coproductions key
International opera coproductions have become a global 21st century trend.

“In the past, each country adhered to the idea that ‘only we can create the finest works,’” explained Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi, executive director of the Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation. “However, due to economic circumstances, theaters worldwide now focus on cross-border collaborations as a means of maintaining high-quality productions while sharing costs among the

countries involved.”

A fundamental principle is to stage performances in multiple countries, ensuring a wide variety of audiences with the ultimate aim of increasing opera attendance. However, the significance of international coproductions goes beyond cost efficiency and audience expansion.

“When artists from different countries collaborate on a performance, this adds new elements of diversity and creativity. As the production travels to different locations and brings in new performers, the work itself evolves and becomes more profound than any single production could achieve,” Yamaguchi said.

‘As the production travels and brings in new performers, the work itself evolves and becomes more profound.’

Tokyo Opera Days
A prime example of successful international coproduction is Tokyo Opera Days, an annual autumn festival held since 2023 as part of the Asian Opera Hub City Initiative.

Launched by the Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation, this initiative aims to position Tokyo as the hub for opera in Asia. The festival showcases a variety of experiences for Japanese and foreign audiences, including costume exhibitions, concerts featuring up-and-coming vocalists and opportunities to experience singing in a grand hall like an opera performer.

“Tokyo is home to world-class orchestras and singers who possess outstanding technical skills

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and a strong sense of responsibility. Looking across Asia, Tokyo is the only place where all the elements necessary for opera are available at the highest level,” Yamaguchi said. Tokyo Opera Days was launched as a three-year initiative under the basic theme of “bringing the highest standard of opera to Tokyo.”

The first year featured the import of Giuseppe Verdi’s “Don Carlo” from the Stuttgart State Opera, which involved re-creating it in Japan under the direction of Lotte de Beer.

Last year, world-renowned director Peter Konwitschny was invited to create a production of “Die Frau ohne Schatten” (“The Woman without a Shadow”) in Japan as a collaboration between the Tokyo Nikikai Opera and Theater Bonn.

Breakthrough and drama with Strauss
The controversial yet acclaimed collaboration on Richard Strauss’ “Die Frau ohne Schatten” was a highlight of Tokyo Opera Days 2024. This bold reinterpretation generated significant discussion within the opera community.

This work presented multiple challenges. The libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal was widely considered difficult to understand due to its mystical themes and convoluted story. Furthermore, the story is based on gender perspectives that are no longer accepted in modern society, including the premise of the husband of a childless woman turning to stone.

“The work has been appreciated primarily because of its extraordinarily beautiful music,” Yamaguchi said. “Together with Konwitschny, we used bold approaches to make it more accessible to contemporary audiences.”

This reinterpretation placed the mythological world of the original in a modern setting. It boldly cut some of the most beloved passages of music, rearranged certain sequences, altered the ending and added Japanese dialogue, all while challenging the gender stereotypes of the original.

This innovative reimagining drew mixed reactions. The harsher criticism included a comment such as “This isn’t ‘Die Frau ohne Schatten,’” but Yamaguchi views this polarization positively.

“Opera fans were divided in their opinions, but we received many favorable reviews from people who don’t usually attend opera, saying they enjoyed it as a “musical drama.” We were particularly gratified by the numerous comments praising the musical performance as ‘wonderful.’ When working with top-tier directors and conductors, singers can perform with greater conviction, resulting in richer musical expression. As a music organization, being recognized for the quality of our music is extremely important to us,” he said.

Following this 2024 reinterpretation in Tokyo, the opera is scheduled to be performed at Theater Bonn, as well as Theater Real in Madrid. The future evolution of this production looks promising, with new performers and creative exchanges anticipated at each location.

Making use of Japan’s strengths
According to Yamaguchi, the decision to base this production in Japan was a major reason why “Die Frau ohne Schatten” could be remade in such a groundbreaking way. Konwitschny had planned to direct this work twice before but abandoned his efforts on both occasions because he was unable to achieve a satisfactory form. It was in Japan that he finally reached his ideal vision.



Konwitschny at a rehearsal with the performers
MAIKO MIYAGAWA

“Japanese performers show other artists tremendous respect and maintain an open ‘let’s try it first’ attitude when working together, whereas Europeans often engage in power games over ‘who wins or loses.’ True partnerships can flourish in Japan. This environment makes it easier to realize productions where the director’s intentions are directly expressed,” Yamaguchi said.

“Japanese stage technicians pay close attention to details and make thorough preparations. Above all, they work harmoniously as a team, with each individual taking responsibility and striving professionally toward common goals.

Japan’s strengths lie not only in the capabilities of its performers, but also in its stage technicians’ expertise and production acumen.

This is why we are able to realize what creators envision,” Yamaguchi explained. It’s also another reason why European directors and conductors are said to be eager to work in Japan.

Japan’s strengths lie not only in its performers’ capabilities, but also in its stage technicians’ expertise and production acumen. The technicians have exceptional skills for delivering 100% completion on schedule for both classical productions and cutting-edge collaborations. A notable example was Tokyo Nikikai’s collaboration with teamLab, a digital art collective, on Giacomo Puccini’s “Turandot,” which demonstrated how Japan’s performers and technicians united as one team to achieve what would be very challenging elsewhere.

Visionary original opera
In September, kicking off the third year of Tokyo Opera Days, Richard Wagner’s “Der fliegende Holländer” (“The Flying Dutchman”) will be performed as a Japanese original production con-

ducted by Toshiyuki Kamioka, who has served as music director at several opera houses in Germany. The director is Kenta Fukasaku, who is active as both a film and stage director. These two talents have teamed up to create an opera with an outstanding artistic vision.

“Fukasaku aims to create ‘something that even people unfamiliar with opera can enjoy, and that audiences can sit through for two or three hours without getting bored,’” Yamaguchi said. “Having a film director handle stage direction is significant. Opera creates a vast world, and a film director’s sense of scale is extremely important. They are particularly well-suited for constructing bold stage sets, lighting and grand worldviews.”

Promoting international careers
The Opera Hub Initiative, through Tokyo Opera Days, also creates opportunities for Japanese singers to perform abroad. The results are already evident.

For example, the soprano Ena Miyachi, who performed in “Die Frau ohne Schatten,” was subsequently invited to perform in Taiwan to play Gilda in Giuseppe Verdi’s “Rigoletto” in October, demonstrating how performances in Tokyo can serve as stepping stones for international career development.

As a long-term vision, Yamaguchi said: “We want to create an environment where artists can move freely across borders. We aim to promote exchanges where Japanese singers perform in Asia and Europe and foreign singers perform in Japan. Opera is sung in the same language regardless of where it’s performed, making it compatible with globalization.”

Future prospects, challenges
Currently, the Tokyo Nikikai Opera is facing a significant challenge from the scheduled closure of its main performance venue, the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, which will undergo a three-year renovation from 2026. However, Yamaguchi has devised a strategy for turning this difficulty into an opportunity.

“There are lots of wonderful theaters through-

out Japan outside Tokyo,” he noted. “We plan to produce operas at excellent theaters in Sapporo, Yamagata, Nagoya, Sakai, Oita and elsewhere, and accumulate expertise in regional production. When Tokyo Bunka Kaikan reopens in 2029, we want to stage a culminating production there.”

Regional production presents new challenges as well. “The proportion of first-time opera attendees is higher in regional areas than in Tokyo. By addressing the challenge of how to attract these newcomers to theaters, we hope to broaden the base of opera appreciation,” Yamaguchi said.

One long-term goal is to attract opera novices to theaters and expand the audience base, but it is equally important to create opportunities for Japanese opera companies to be invited to perform in Europe.

“Our mission is to showcase Japan’s ‘ideal form of creation’ to the world. Tokyo is a city where directors’ and conductors’ intentions are perfectly realized in a way that differs from Europe,” Yamaguchi said.

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Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi, Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation executive director
Involved in the foundation’s productions since 1997, Yamaguchi has helped develop opera culture in Japan by launching Tokyo Opera Days, staging international coproductions and pursuing other initiatives.



The Tokyo Nikikai Opera Theatre and teamLab collaborate on a performance of Giacomo Puccini’s “Turandot.”
TEAMLAB / DANIEL KRAMER / TOKYO NIKIKAI OPERA FOUNDATION



Following her showing in “Die Frau ohne Schatten,” soprano Ena Miyachi (shown in “Carmen”) has been invited to Taiwan to play Gilda in Giuseppe Verdi’s “Rigoletto” in October. MASASHIKO TERASHI

INFORMATION

TOKYO PERFORMING ARTS SELECTIONS FOR 2025-26

Tokyo is home to world-class orchestras, exceptional singers and superior technical capabilities, establishing itself as one of the world’s premier classical music cities. The 2025–2026 season highlights this strength with a dynamic mix of tradition and innovation.

A major highlight is Wagner’s “Der fliegende Hollaender” (“The Flying Dutchman”), presented as the centerpiece of the third year of the Tokyo Opera Days campaign launched by the Tokyo Nிகikai Opera Foundation in 2023.

Also featured are the world premiere of the new opera “Natasha,” the first revival in five years of “M,” choreographed and directed by Maurice Bejart, and subscription concerts by the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra under chief conductor Kahchun Wong. A new opera in collaboration with the Royal Ballet and Opera, Covent Garden, adds international creative energy.

Together, these events form an extraordinary season that showcases the city’s position among top-tier cultural destinations.

‘Natasha’ presented by the New National Theatre Tokyo

In this opera, displaced migrant Natasha encounters youth Arato in a haunting journey through landscapes from sea to forest. Guided by a mysterious Mephistopheles figure, they view scenes of the “Seven Hells” caused by human desire.

This multilingual world premiere — performed in Japanese, German and Ukrainian — examines our universal search for belonging amid suffering and redemption.

With music by leading contemporary composer Toshio Hosokawa, “Natasha” will premiere at the New National Theatre, Tokyo. Artistic Director Kazushi Ono, former music director of La Monnaie in Brussels and chief conductor of the Lyon Opera, commissioned this profound work, with a libretto by celebrated bilingual author Yoko Tawada. Hosokawa delivers a powerful meditation on contemporary displacement while demonstrating Japan’s commitment to innovative operatic storytelling.



Performance schedule: Aug. 11 (Mon.) 2 p.m., 13 (Wed.) 2 p.m., 15 (Fri.) 6:30 p.m., 17 (Sun.) 2 p.m.
Venue: New National Theatre, Tokyo



Japan Philharmonic Subscription Concert

The Japan Philharmonic Orchestra will celebrate its 70th anniversary in 2026. Chief conductor Kahchun Wong continues his acclaimed Mahler series, presenting the complex Symphony No. 6 (“Tragic”) with its particularly intriguing interpretive challenges.

The young maestro’s approach to these distinctive compositional elements will offer compelling insights. Other performances feature Akira Ifukube’s “SF Symphony Fantasy No. 1,” bringing the iconic Godzilla melody into the concert hall.

Wong demonstrates his commitment to both international masterworks and Japanese composers throughout the season. This season marks a historic shift from the September-to-July schedule to April-to-March, beginning in 2026. As a transitional season, it heightens anticipation for the orchestra’s anniversary celebration.



ATUSHI YAMAGUCHI

Performance schedule: Tokyo: Fridays at 7 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m.; Yokohama: Saturdays at 3 p.m.
Venue: Suntory Hall (Tokyo), Yokohama Minato Mirai Hall (Yokohama)
Note: The 2025-2026 season features six performances each in Tokyo and Yokohama.



Tokyo Opera Days

Marking the final year of this iteration of Tokyo Opera Days, this festival is headlined by Wagner’s “Der fliegende Hollaender” (“The Flying Dutchman”), conducted by Toshiyuki Kamioka. A rich lineup of events will unfold throughout the festival, offering something for everyone — from devoted opera fans to curious newcomers and international visitors alike. Highlights include English-interpreted backstage tours that offer exclusive production insights that bring audiences closer to the magic behind the scenes.

Don’t miss this opportunity to immerse yourself in the beauty of opera and the spirit of autumn.



TOKYO OPERA DAYS: Sept. 6 (Sat.) to 15 (Mon.)
• **Tokyo Nிகikai Opera Theatre’s “Der fliegende Hollaender”**
Performance schedule: Sept. 11 (Thur.) 6 p.m., 13 (Sat.) 2 p.m., 14 (Sun.) 2 p.m., 15 (Mon.) 2 p.m.
Venue: Tokyo Bunka Kaikan
• **Other events:** Tokyo Music Competition winners’ concert; Classical Music in Town “Machinaka Concerts”; Let’s Sing on the Stage Like an Opera Singer; backstage tour with English translation and many more.



‘M’ presented by the NBS-Japan Performing Arts Foundation

In this centennial year of Yukio Mishima’s birth, his spirits lives on through “M.” Ballet choreographer Maurice Bejart’s masterpiece, created with revolutionary dancing for the Tokyo Ballet, returns after five years, bringing together all principal dancers on stage.

The title “M” symbolizes Mishima, *mer* (sea), *metamorphose* (transformation), *mort* (death), *mystere* (mystery) and *mythologie* (mythology) — embodying his life philosophy and aesthetic principles. Masterworks of Mishima literature, including “The Sound of Waves” and “The Temple of the Golden Pavilion,” come to life on stage, enchanting literary fans.

Since its 1993 premiere, Bejart’s creation has been acclaimed at prestigious venues worldwide. This vibrant world is where Mishima’s soul comes alive through dance.



KIYONORI HASEGAWA

Performance schedule: Sept. 20 (Sat.) 2 p.m., 21 (Sun.) 2 p.m., 23 (Tue.) 1 p.m.
Venue: Tokyo Bunka Kaikan



Tokyo Nிகikai Opera Theatre with Royal Ballet and Opera, Covent Garden: ‘Cavalleria Rusticana,’ ‘Pagliacci’

Blood, passion and jealousy culminate in opera’s most explosive double bill as the Tokyo Nிகikai Opera Foundation partners with the Royal Opera House for the first time.

This new production pairs Pietro Mascagni’s beloved “Cavalleria Rusticana” with Ruggero Leoncavallo’s iconic “Pagliacci” — the legendary “Cav-Pag” combination that defines Italian verismo opera at its most intense. Renowned Italian maestro Andrea Battistoni leads the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, where he serves as principal conductor, delivering passionate performances that capture the raw emotional power of these masterworks. Acclaimed director Damiano Michieletto brings innovative staging to this tale of love, betrayal and revenge that unfolds in one evening. This historic partnership showcases Tokyo’s growing prominence in global opera.



IVOR KERSLAKE / ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

Performance schedule: Feb.12 (Thur.) 6 p.m., 13 (Fri.) 2 p.m., 14 (Sat.) 2 p.m., 15 (Sun.) 2 p.m.
Venue: Tokyo Bunka Kaikan



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