

Haenchen's music gives pause for reflecting on war

By Mikiko Miyakawa
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Putting his faith in the power of music, German conductor Hartmut Haenchen is hoping to make audiences reflect on “war and peace,” the theme of his three-year project.

“I try to reach people’s emotions through music. If people are moved to contemplation, then I’ve done my job,” said Haenchen, 72, in an interview.

Last year the globally renowned maestro launched “War and Peace,” a concert series comprising nearly 30 events across Europe and Japan.

He came up with the idea as a way to commemorate a slew of important dates beginning in 2014. Last year saw the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I and the 75th anniversary of the beginning of World War II. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 25th anniversary of German reunification.

“I thought I should bring them all together for a huge project,” he said.

The concert series premiered in Helsinki, the venue of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), in May last year. Haenchen believes the city played an important role in peace in the 20th century.

“For Europe, Helsinki was the key to ending the Cold War between Russia and the West,” said Haenchen, who was born and raised in East Germany.

The project is now in its second year. Events in many European cities have featured a thought-provoking selection of musical works and operas on the theme of war and peace.

Operas tell war tales

Haenchen kicked off the ongoing project this year by conducting Gluck’s opera “Iphigenie en Tauride” at the Grand Theatre de Geneve in Geneva.

“This is a piece where you can see what war is doing to a family,” he said. “This family is completely destroyed by war — the Trojan War.”

To mark the Tokyo air raids at the end of World War II, he conducted New Japan Phil-



Photo by G. Mothes



Photo by Riccardo Musacchio

Hartmut Haenchen in rehearsals

harmonic at Sumida Triphony Hall in Tokyo for the Sumida Memorial Peace Concert on March 10. The final piece of the program was Haenchen’s own arrangement for the conclusion of Mozart’s Requiem.

“I try to reach people’s emotions through music.”

“I was born in Dresden, and it’s a similar story there. On Feb. 13, Dresden was destroyed, like Tokyo was destroyed in March,” he said. “The two dates are so close — I feel a personal connection.”

Later this month, he will conduct Beethoven’s opera “Fidelio” at Teatro Real in Madrid.

“The opera shows how people can really

overcome hardships,” he explained. “This is something I want to have come from the heart.”

He added, “Because I’m not a politician, I have no influence on politics. But I can have an influence through music.”

The centerpiece of the “War and Peace” series is Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 8. It was composed in 1943, the year Haenchen was born.

“Shostakovich’s 8th came to be known as the ‘Stalingrad Symphony,’ and you can hear what went on during World War II,” he said. Haenchen, who met the great Russian composer twice, had the chance to personally ask him about his music and experiences as a victim of Stalin’s oppression.

The maestro said he had a very touching experience during the “War and Peace” series, when he took baton for the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra in Tokyo last July.

“This was the day that the Malaysian Airlines plane coming from Amsterdam was shot down in Ukraine,” he recalled.

“The audience was just silent, showing that something was happening around us that was connected to the music and my idea. It was really touching, and people were thinking, ‘What are we doing this for, this war and peace?’ This is actually what I want to achieve through this series,” he said.

Memories of East Germany

Haenchen was born in Dresden, then part of East Germany. He was almost 2 years old when his hometown — known as “Florence on the Elbe” — was destroyed in the Allied bombing in 1945.

Though he was too young to remember the bombing, he said he always saw “a sea of fire

from a basement window” in his dreams. “I still have this image in my mind,” the maestro said of his war memories.

But the war’s end did not immediately mean the arrival of peace for the little boy. Growing up in a country under the control of the former Soviet Union, he inevitably witnessed oppression in a variety of forms.

“I’ll always remember that day,” he said of June 17, 1953, the day when thousands of workers rallied against the government in what is known as the East German Uprising of 1953. It happened to be the day when the young Haenchen had an exam for the Dresden Kreuzchor boys choir. With no means of transport, he walked 25 kilometers from his house to the city. In the city center, he witnessed Russian tanks smashing into the demonstrators. “I’ll never forget what I saw,” he said.

Like many citizens of East Germany, he was followed by informants of the Stasi, East Germany’s secret police.

After the German reunification, he was able to read the records the Stasi had compiled about him.

In a short documentary film titled “The Skies over Dresden,” he describes his feelings upon discovering that one of his relatives had informed on him. The monitoring started when he was 16 and continued until October 1989, he said.

As a musician, he struggled under the Communist government. There were periods between 1979 and 1982 when he was banned from travel, and most of his concerts were canceled. But in 1983, he was given another chance to travel with a chamber orchestra in Berlin, which had suddenly gained popularity around the world.

He eventually left East Germany in 1986, three years before the Berlin Wall finally came down. He lived in the Netherlands for almost 20 years and served as general music director of De Nederlandse Opera from 1986 to 1999 and chief conductor of Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra from 1986 and 2002, having solidified his international acclaim.

Haenchen will conduct the New Japan Philharmonic on Oct. 24 at Parthenon Tama in Tama, Tokyo, and Oct. 25 at Suntory Hall in Minato Ward, Tokyo, for two Brahms works. Visit www.njp.or.jp for more information.