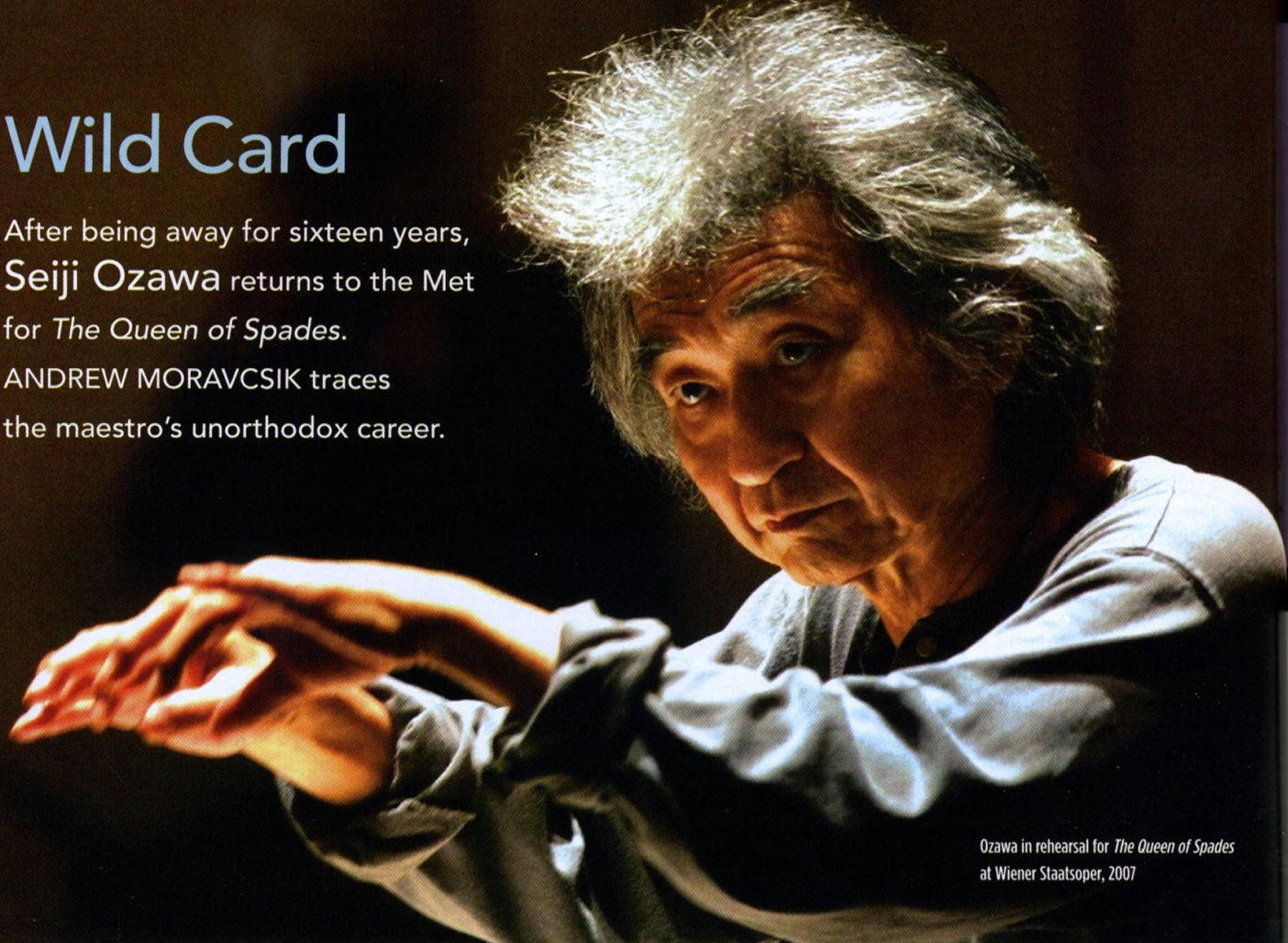


Wild Card

After being away for sixteen years, Seiji Ozawa returns to the Met for *The Queen of Spades*.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK traces the maestro's unorthodox career.



Ozawa in rehearsal for *The Queen of Spades* at Wiener Staatsoper, 2007

To watch conductor Seiji Ozawa at the podium is a spectacle in itself. His technique is dazzlingly visual, evincing remarkable balletic agility: his body leans at impossible angles, his arms trace fluid lines, and his long salt-and-pepper hair sways in circles about his head. It's a style that Richard Dyer, former *Boston Globe* music critic, calls "calligraphy in motion, precise and evocative." At seventy-three, Ozawa ranks among the most charismatic and most celebrated of contemporary conductors.

He is also one of the most controversial. Critics, particularly in the U.S., have long complained that his interpretations are more dynamic than deep, seldom resulting in memorable, let alone definitive, renditions of major works. His long tenure as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra ended with animosity on both sides. There, as in his current position as music director of the Vienna State Opera, his best work seems to skirt the standard repertoire by which most great maestros are judged.

As Ozawa returns to the Met after a sixteen-year absence to conduct Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, with Ben Heppner and Maria Guleghina in the leading roles, both fans and detractors have a rare opportunity to make up their own minds about one of classical music's most energetic and enigmatic superstars.

Born in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, where his father was a dentist, Ozawa was raised in Japan. His love for Western music was nurtured by the church. Ozawa's mother was a Presbyterian, and he and his three brothers were taught hymns at Sunday school, while his older brother, originally thought to be

the most talented one in the family, played the organ. It soon became clear that young Seiji was a piano prodigy. From the age of six or seven, he immersed himself in Bach, Beethoven and Mendelssohn, but his virtuoso career came to a sudden halt in his teenage years when he broke two fingers playing the forbidden sport of rugby. He switched to conducting and composition, graduating with honors from Tokyo's Toho Gakuen School of Music. Upon graduation, the twenty-four-year-old Ozawa loaded his motorbike onto a freighter and headed for Europe.

Ozawa's rise was swift: within two years of his arrival, he had won a conducting prize at Tanglewood, worked with Herbert von Karajan in West Berlin and come to the attention of Leonard Bernstein, who named him assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Over the next decade, positions followed as music director of Chicago's Ravinia Festival, the Toronto Symphony and the San Francisco Symphony. By 1973, he reached a capstone — the music directorship of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Sporting a Beatles haircut and Nehru jackets, the thirty-eight-year-old overwhelmed Boston's hyper-traditional Symphony Hall scene. Overnight, America's most staid orchestra gained a hip new early-'70s image. Once in charge, he put his distinct stamp on the repertoire. Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn were out; Schoenberg, Messiaen and Takemitsu were in. Scriabin's *Poem of Fire* was performed with the house lights out and a rainbow of colors projected on the ceiling. The front office advertised "Put a

little Ozawa in your life!" Ticket sales soared, and the endowment grew fat. At the time of Ozawa's arrival, the endowment was "modest," according to a BSO representative. When he departed, on August 31, 2002, it was a little over \$228 million.

No one expected him to stay in Boston for long. Some suspected that he missed Japan. Others thought he hankered after a post in Europe. He guest conducted throughout the world. Yet he was still in Boston nearly thirty years later — the longest tenure of a music director of a major American orchestra in recent times.

It may have been too long. Critics had become hostile. Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* charged that Ozawa "continues to pilot the Boston Symphony toward mediocrity." *The Wall Street Journal's* Greg Sandow delivered an even nastier cut: "He still dances on the podium with his trademark pixie charm, but he looks far better than his orchestra sounds."

The BSO players themselves grew restive, signing letters of protest and leaking complaints to the press. He spent too much time traveling, they said, and when he was in town, he was indecisive and uninspired. Ozawa's effort to recommit himself by abruptly reorganizing the Tanglewood Festival backfired when it triggered a raft of resignations. The situation grew intolerable. In 2002, Ozawa resigned from the BSO to become music director of the Vienna State Opera, where his contract runs until 2010, when Austrian native Franz Welser-Möst will replace him.

Ozawa's shift to opera has been just as idiosyncratic as his rise as a conductor. To discuss it, I caught up with him in Matsumoto, Japan, at the Saito Kinen Festival — an annual event he founded in 1992 to honor his former teacher, Hideo Saito.

"I never planned to be an opera conductor," Ozawa recalls. "When I was a student, we had no opera in Japan. I only heard my first one when I arrived in Europe." He continues, "Karajan first pushed me in 1964. He said, 'Seiji, now it is time for you to do opera.'" Within a year, Ozawa had assisted Karajan at a Salzburg *Don Giovanni* and conducted George London and Reri Grist in a concert performance of *Rigoletto* in Toronto. The next year Karajan arranged for Ozawa to conduct his own *Così Fan Tutte* at Salzburg.

Over the years that followed, in San Francisco, Boston, Tanglewood and at the Saito Kinen Festival, Ozawa became known for semi-staged opera. Among many memorable evenings was a 1988 performance of Strauss's *Elektra* with Hildegard Behrens, Christa Ludwig and Nadine Secunde, later released by Philips. He also conducted fully staged opera, including the 1983 world premiere of Messiaen's mammoth *St. François d'Assise* at the Paris Opera. With the move to Vienna in 2002, says Ozawa, "my life became completely opera — plus the Vienna Philharmonic. I thought I would like it, and I do."

The critics have remained divided. His way with eighteenth-century opera, as with corresponding symphonic works, is often stiff and brittle. Vienna's leading commentator, Wilhelm Sinkiewicz of *Die Presse*, criticizes Ozawa for "failing to raise musical standards," particularly in Mozart: "Every music director here has to do Mozart — it's the core of our Viennese operatic identity. Yet Ozawa's efforts are unidiomatic, lacking in dramatic focus — in the end, simply boring."

Yet Ozawa cannot be dismissed so easily. European audiences and musicians love him. He maintains a special relationship with Karajan's old orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, which recently made him an Honorary Member. True, he has spent relatively little time conducting Verdi, Wagner and the core of the opera canon. Yet even skeptics concede that, as in symphonic repertoire, Ozawa is most inspired by lesser-known works. His triumphs include operas by Ravel, Janáček and Russian neo-classical composers such as Stravinsky.

An earlier Russian neo-classicist, Tchaikovsky, has become Ozawa's first choice for special nights. *Eugene Onegin* was the vehicle for his Met debut in 1992, but these days he seems to prefer *The Queen of Spades*. A recent run of the opera in Vienna contained, according to Sinkiewicz, "by far the best opera performances of his years here.... For him, the opera is foolproof." Ozawa laughs off the libretto — Pushkin's weird tale of a soldier whose obsession with gambling leads him to leave his lover, cause her grandmother's death and lose his mind — as "a little crazy." What attracts Ozawa is the scale and range of the orchestral score.

"Slava Rostropovich was my big brother, you know," he says, "and he told me *The Queen of Spades* is really Tchaikovsky's Seventh Symphony." Compared to *Onegin*, he notes, "It is less concerned with intimate detail but has more varied public scenes." Each scene surges forward, propelled by an intense rhythmic drive welling up from the pit. *Queen of Spades* also features an exceptionally wide range of orchestral colors, as the faux-Mozartean rococo gaiety of the Act II ballroom gives way first to romantic yearning, then to moods of dark brooding, mystery and neurosis. The trick is to achieve the latter without spoiling the sense of neo-classical delicacy — a balance Ozawa strikes to perfection.

Still, it would be unfair to attribute Ozawa's affinity for this opera simply to a penchant for orchestral pyrotechnics. On the surface, the music of *Queen of Spades* may seem simple, even blatant. Yet not until the premiere of Richard Strauss's *Salome*, a decade and a half later, would a composer so skillfully deploy the orchestra to capture the shifting state of the unconscious mind. Measure by measure, note by note, Tchaikovsky's music subtly traces the disintegration of Gherman's psyche as his obsession with gambling destroys him and those around him. A 1991 RCA recording of the opera with the BSO and Mirella Freni, Vladimir Atlantov, Sergei Leiferkus and Dmitri Hvorostovsky reveals live performances of uncommon musical imagination and emotional sensitivity. Ozawa achieves the countless minute shifts in tempo, dynamics and orchestral balance required to convey the psychological detail, while retaining a sweeping vision of the work as a whole.

A half-century ago, when the young Seiji arrived in Europe, never having heard an opera, surely no one could have predicted that Tchaikovsky's ghost story would be among his signature pieces. But then Ozawa has always thrived by defying expectations. □

ANDREW MORAVCSIK teaches at Princeton University. His music criticism appears in *The Financial Times*, *Opera*, *Newsweek* and elsewhere.

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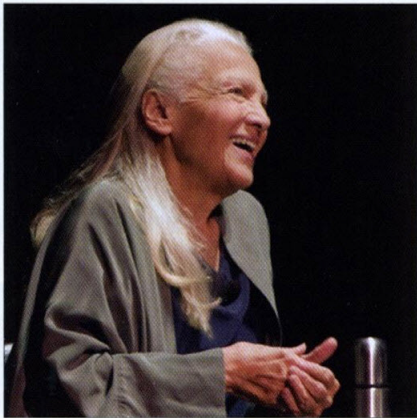
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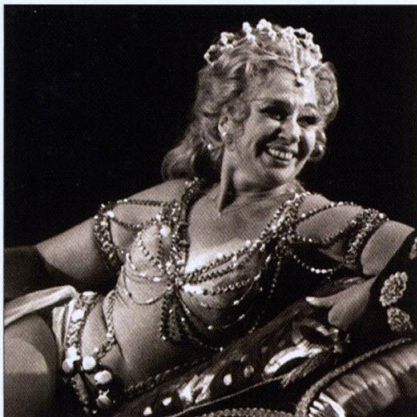


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