



Anthem Project: Connecting the World Through National Anthems

Yamada Kazuki, Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, and Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Interviewed by Katayama Morihide, Professor of Keio University and Sakura Osamu, Professor of the University of Tokyo

The Yamada Kazuki Anthem Project, Road to 2020 (hereinafter Anthem Project) is a plan to record 206 national anthems onto CD in the run up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The project was devised and brought together by conductor Yamada Kazuki, who was the winner of the first prize at the 51st International Competition for Young Conductors and the public prize in Besançon (2009). It came to fruition in November 2020 with a CD set, “*Sekai no kokka-Utau chikyugi* (National Anthems of the World—Song Globe)” (sold by King Records Co. Ltd.), which was created through cooperation and performances involving Yamada, the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonic Chorus of Tokyo.

Professor Katayama Morihide, who is both a music critic and political scientist, and Sakura Osamu, a member of the Discuss Japan editorial board, spoke to Yamada about his feelings making the CDs, memories from the over five-year process of making them, and his feelings now that the project is finished.



Conductor Yamada Kazuki
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Road to 2020

Katayama Morihide: In the run up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, I was very surprised to see your “Anthem Project” CD set (National Anthems of the World—Song Globe [hereinafter “Song Globe”]) come to fruition; a recording of over 200 national anthems from around the world, and what’s more each sung in their own language.

Yamada Kazuki: I was surprised too. But when we tried to get started, it was difficult to acquire sheet music for some national anthems. And even if we got hold of the music, it was hard to handle the languages, and I thought, “Will we really finish this project?” I was the conductor, but other people involved in the project had a really tough time trying to finish in time for the staging of the Olympics. The Song Globe CD set is the fruit of everyone’s feelings during the project.



Prof. Katayama Morihide

Katayama: From the beginning, was the plan to create a sound recording as a record in time for the Olympics?

Yamada: Actually, the Olympics came later. In 2014 I became the Music Director of the Philharmonic Chorus of Tokyo (hereinafter Tokon) and a member of the board of directors (since 2016, also Chairman). Now I was involved in management and needed to do something about Tokon's future. So I asked everyone if they had any ideas. I thought the concept was key and I mentioned the suggestion, for example, of recording all the world's national anthems. In fact, a chorus member already had the idea of recording CDs with not only national anthems but also favorite songs from those countries.



Logo of the Anthem Project
Courtesy of King Records

At around that time I started talking a little about this idea to various people that I was working with in the music department of the Japan Arts Corporation, and I spoke to Nihei Jun-ichi, who was President and CEO of the organization. He said, "OK, the Olympics is a good time, so let's start an Anthem Project and aim to produce a CD set for it." And the project started.

Katayama: As a conductor you are always looking at the big picture and you thought of a big project to bring together national anthems and favorite national songs, but afterwards you tied it to the Olympics and involved other people. Am I right?

Yamada: Yes, that's right. But at the planning stage we got started without knowing precisely how many countries there are in the world (laughs). It was tough!

Katayama: In the end the CD was sold by King Records. Was that the plan from the start?

Yamada: I send an email directly to Matsushita Hisaaki, a producer at King Records. Before it moved ahead as a project, I asked someone at King Records, "You could do this kind of project, couldn't you?" and received a positive response. But I think the number of days needed for recording and recording costs, and so on, were also hard for King Records (laughs). Yet, they sensed the value of the project and the considerable educational value of having this CD set, so I am very grateful that they started the project without focusing on profitability.

Katayama: And then a "globe box" CD set was created. I've never seen a CD set in that shape.



"Sekai no kokka—Utau chikyugi" (National Anthems of the World—Song Globe)
Courtesy of King Records

Yamada: That was Matsushita's idea. From the outset, my idea was to look at the earth as a single planet from the perspective of space. The earth is only one little planet floating in space and humans have arbitrarily decided national borders, so I was focused on space.

Connecting the globe through national anthems

Katayama: As a concept, the idea of “connecting the globe through music” is simple and persuasive, and a great idea, but what image did you have of national anthems?

Yamada: National anthems are not about what you like or don't like or personal feelings; they are symbols of a country. For all the 206 countries in the world (International Olympic Committee) there are probably at least 206 ways that each country's citizens relate to their national anthem. All the same, when a national soccer team lines up before a game, for example, everyone sings together. For better or worse, a national anthem is a national symbol so I thought we could make a single creation out of that fundamentally positive musical aspect.

Something I can say after finishing the recording is that the Japanese national anthem is unique among the national anthems of the world. There are lots of national anthems in Asia but there are hardly any in a pentatonic scale. Most national anthems are written in a Western heptatonic scale. In that respect, the Japanese national anthem is not only pentatonic, but also short and very slow. I think it's something unique we can be proud of before the world.

Katayama: I expect military songs, revolutionary songs, and marches account for quite a large proportion of national anthems, but having conducted over 200 songs, was there any one where you thought, “*This is a national anthem!*”?

Yamada: Military song forms accounted for around one third of the total, I think. And about one third were in a minor key. Island countries were interesting. Over 90% were in a major key, and many had a sound that felt cheerful and tropical. Another interesting thing was the period when they were established. Countries of South America and the African continent established their national anthems when they were released from colonial rule and became independent countries. So lots of national anthems were created around the same time. Anthems from South America, for example from Uruguay or Argentina, have preludes that are extremely long at over one minute. Once the main section starts that is long again, so no matter how brief you want to make them, they take five minutes or more. They are in a traditional form similar to classical music, so you could say they were composed by Mozart and everyone would believe you.

Even though they are all called “national anthems,” they are packed with elements that you can't understand just by looking at the surface. Some national anthems are moving and some are of high artistic merit right from the beginning. It was interesting.

Katayama: The classification of national anthems on Song Globe (206 anthems recorded on seven CDs plus a DVD) is innovative, isn't it? The sections are: “Songs of the Islands (CD 1),” “European Continent I (Western Europe / Southern Europe) (CD 2),” “Age of Discovery (CD 3),” “American

Continent (CD 4),” “African Continent (CD 5),” “European Continent II (Northern Europe / Eastern Europe / Former Soviet Union) (CD 6)” and “The Silk Road (CD 7)”. And at the beginning of each CD there is a medley of the national anthems contained within. What was the idea behind doing that?



“*Sekai no kokka—Utau chikyugi*” (National Anthems of the World—Song Globe) is a globe-shaped box set of seven CDs and one DVD.
Courtesy of King Records

Yamada: It wasn’t my own idea. As well as conducting, I asked composer and arranger Nobunaga Takatomi to handle the arrangements and overall supervision along with several other arrangers he introduced. The CD classification was Nobunaga’s idea. It’s an extremely musical method of classification. The titles “Age and Discovery” and “The Silk Road” are evocative in themselves, and national anthems became part of medleys under each classification theme. And those medleys were also wonderful.

Singing in the original languages

Katayama: Certainly, historical and geographical links emerge through the classification. And another very distinctive feature of Song Globe is that Tokon members sing all the anthems in the original

language. That makes sense but I expect the pronunciation was hard at first. Could you tell us about that idea and how you did it?



Conductor Yamada Kazuki
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Yamada: Actually, we thought about it quite casually (laughs). For example, we realized that we couldn't avoid singing in the original language and that we'd have to work hard. But some national anthems have four verses and that would be very hard, so we only sang the first one, just adding a nice piano accompaniment. It was kind of like that. Nevertheless, Nobunaga and the other arrangers all pooled their efforts. For example, they wrote choral pieces in four parts and some had eight parts. So it got more and more impressive. When we finished, I saw that they had exceeded my expectations and taken it to an artistic level. That was really wonderful. I was truly impressed by everyone's ability and felt glad to have done this project.

Checking the lyrics and the singing was tough. It would be bad to have mistakes in the lyrics, so we contacted embassies and acquired official sheet music, but every embassy responded in a different way. Some embassies casually told us to use whatever we liked, but in some cases embassy officials very enthusiastically came directly to the recording location to instruct us. The real problem was when there was no embassy in Japan. And there are quite a lot of those. Then it was difficult even to know the country's language, so we did things like have Japanese people who had lived in those countries come to us or, if no Japanese person had been there, rely on the help of a linguistics researcher in Osaka. We received guidance on language for all the national anthem singing. Tokon has sung in various different languages before but we came across methods of producing sound that were completely new to us. For example, there is something called the "glottal stop." I can't reproduce it well, but it's made by closing ("stopping") the glottis.

Katayama: Which country's language was that?

Yamada: It was common in island nations. Also, in Africa there are words that begin with “n.” We came across unknown languages one after another. There were languages with vowels relatively close to Japanese, but songs with a fast tempo as well as difficult pronunciation were extremely tough. Of course, we rerecorded them numerous times. The biggest issue was when the linguist would teach us to “say it like this” but we couldn't reproduce that well, and when we sang it didn't sound like what we'd been taught. The linguist wasn't a music professional either, so of course it was difficult for them to give instruction about music too.

Katayama: Speaking and singing are different things, aren't they?

Yamada: We had those kinds of dilemmas, so we struggled a lot (laughs). So, depending on the national anthem, we couldn't record in one day and took about two days instead. Even so, sometimes we'd listen to the recording afterwards and think “no... one more time” and rerecord at the very end. So, the Tokon members really did do a good job. Even so, unfortunately I think there were times when the language wouldn't sound right to native speakers. So, we worked with the goal of producing something that at least wouldn't sound rude to people from those places.

Sakura Osamu: Some things are so difficult that a song isn't fully possible, even with a linguist present. Nevertheless, it was wonderful that there was someone to lead the project and someone to research languages from around the world that no one had heard of before. The level of academic studies in Japan really is quite high (laughs).



Prof. Sakura Osamu
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Yamada: It's amazing. There isn't a language that Japanese academics aren't able to cope with. Even when the languages are very difficult, they can make a guess as far as “it's something like this.” They haven't been to the place or heard the language, but a linguist will instruct that, “This dialect is strong there, so it will probably be like this.” Even when it is written with the same letters, they'll say, “It's probably like this.” To be able to make a guess like that is amazing.

“Why are Japanese people singing our national anthem?”

Katayama: In a sense, while working as quickly as possible in very difficult circumstances, you were able to spend quite a lot of time on making the CDs and were able to indulge yourselves, and that feels really unbelievable to me.

Yamada: Yes, that's right. There was a huge number of times when I made a final check and said, “This one's a rerecord.” Normally, that wouldn't be allowed, but King Records would reply, “Let's face it head on and do it properly.”

Katayama: If you were trying to create a collection of national anthems as a document, it would be enough to collect all the national anthems together. But that's not the case. This is a message from a Japanese choir to the world, isn't it?

Yamada: The finished national anthems are slowly coming out as videos. For example, the Polish national anthem. Polish people have seen it tens of thousands of times online and said thank you. There's a sense of, "Why are Japanese people singing this?" but also, "Thanks to these people from a far off country who are singing our national anthem." Also, one Finnish person saw the video of us singing the Finland national anthem from memory and their opinion was: "I'm very happy, but I don't understand why Japanese people are memorizing other countries' national anthems and singing them in such a warm way."

These days audio and video can travel around the world in an instant, so even though people wonder "why?", I think it has created a kind of interaction that didn't exist before. We didn't have such grand ideas when we started the project, but in the end, it ended up going in that direction.

The national anthem with a very artistic finish and one that I keep recommending is Morocco's (<http://tvuch.com/social/367/>). To be honest, I didn't even know the country existed. But of course the video we uploaded has been watched thousands of times by Moroccans. They were interested that Japanese people were singing their national anthem. Just that it becomes a topic of conversation is a positive thing, isn't it?

Katayama: I'm sure it is a powerful spur to cultural exchange. It's not simply choral performances. Each CD begins with a medley and through the arrangements the project also has the feel of a work of art created by Japan's musical world.

Yamada: Yes, that's right. We distributed responsibility for countries among the arrangers. Each person then built up an image in their heads and each one studied the national anthems in their own way. At that point, some arranged the music according to the original in an orthodox manner, while others changed the motifs. I think that was where showing skill and the individuality of arrangers really came to the fore. Arrangers grow and change over two and a half years. They came up with ideas which I don't think they would have before and, in a good way, I think they made it a place for themselves to experiment. That was another of the things that made me really happy.

Katayama: As separate, newly arranged, pieces of music I believe that they are a message from Tokon, a form of creative cultural exchange message based on world national anthems from a Japanese choir.

Products of the essential "neutrality" of music

Sakura: Starting with your own hard work, the project is a coming together of efforts from the music world, music industry world, as well as the academic world and all of Japan's cultural power. In that sense, it is an incredible project.

Yamada: It really is thanks to everyone. It is called the Yamada Kazuki Anthem Project and even though I conducted it all, having my name in the title really is presumptuous. I represent the project, but more than that everyone helped me enormously and it was thanks to that, which makes me very happy.

Katayama: A personal matter, but around fifteen years ago I was involved in an encyclopedia-like project to faithfully record all the national anthems of the world onto CD, introduce all the countries, and include a commentary covering things such as how the melodies and lyrics came about. But there were difficult issues with various countries regarding collecting the sheet music, deciding the correct lyrics, etc., and the project was abandoned after about one year. There's no comparison, but I really am impressed at how you used your own methods to see the project through. What's more, there's a concept, arrangements, and a unity to the album. Again, it really feels unbelievable.

Yamada: I can't believe it either (laughs).

Sakura: Elementary and middle schools have lessons on understanding and interacting with foreign cultures, but in reality when people from overseas come to Japan, there are problems with them being unable to fit into society. So, I felt it could be one chance to think about the questions "What is a country?" and "What is a world?" Or maybe it could also be used as teaching material in schools? The process of producing the CDs was very interesting but, even apart from the musical perspective, I think it's a project that can potentially contribute to a wide diversity of fields. I think that this kind of project has a hidden potential to spread in various forms, accrue various connections, and develop more and more.

Yamada: Maybe, as it were, this was a project that couldn't have happened anywhere other than Japan? Maybe countries that talk about themselves being "first" wouldn't be able to sing the songs of the world impartially? Could they have sung the national anthems of countries with which they were in political conflict or were opposed to? Perhaps only Japan could have done that.

Sakura: In that sense too it's a positive facet of Japan and I'd like to promote that more.

Yamada: As a musician I think, you really can love every country's music with the same perspective and the same approach. Maybe the positive features of that "neutrality" emerge in the project itself.

From "Road to 2020" to "Road to 2050"

Katayama: Now that the CD is finished, do you have any projects in progress for the future?

Yamada: Initially, I intended to do a tour to celebrate the release of the CDs when they were finished, but then the COVID-19 pandemic happened.

As we were making the CDs, we introduced the Anthem Project by putting a world map in concert programs and saying, "We will perform the national anthems and favorite songs of this region." In doing so, a brand new way of making programs was born and we gained expertise, but when you address the

theme of national anthems, you need to know more about each of those countries. When you try to learn lots about each country's history, culture, lifestyles and so on, from food to clothes, there's no end to it. So, while we looked to the Tokyo Olympics and talked about the "Road to 2020," mid-way thorough I personally switched to "Road to 2050." It may be too pretentious to call it a "life work" but I do need to continue it over that kind of span, and I think it's a project that's worth continuing. It won't finish simply as a project that runs alongside the Olympics. Tokon will continue to present the songs of the world and, when the occasion arises, perform various songs of the world such as national anthems and favorite songs.

Katayama: Is that because from the start you've had this strong idea to feature not only national anthems, but also other songs loved in those countries, and then branch out from there?

Yamada: That's right. If we look at Japan, for example, we could do a comprehensive compilation of *minyo* folk music. It could be "CD1: Along the Tokaido road" and "CD2: Along the Nakasendo road". But that's another absurd idea, isn't it? (laughs). We could talk about this forever, but there aren't many projects where you can keep on fantasizing this much. The more you do, the more you realize your own smallness. The more you do, the more you realize that Japan is just one country in the world. The more you do, the more you think that humans have arbitrarily divided up the planet. And you get a powerful idea that if you looked at that planet from space it would be a tiny place.

Katayama: For you, for Tokon, and for all the performers, arrangers, and composers involved, it's a project with potential for development, isn't it? Tokon is a group with a history as Japan's leading major source of choral creation, so from that perspective of creation, of course I hope you can continue the national anthem collection for another thirty years.

Yamada: Yes, that's right. My heartfelt wish is that all sorts of people become involved, not just me and Tokon.

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YAMADA Kazuki, Conductor

Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, and Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Born in Kanagawa, Japan, in 1979. He is now a resident in Berlin. In 2009, he won the 51st Besançon International Competition for young conductors. In recent years, he is conducting as a guest to NHK Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI Torino, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, who's Principal Guest Conductor he was from 2012 to 2017, the Polish National Radio Symphony

Orchestra with pianist Simon Trpčeski and Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, and in the 2020/21 season, Yamada made his debut with the Orchestre Nationale de Belgique, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg and Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. He is also the Permanent Conductor of Japan Philharmonic, Principal Guest Conductor of Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Music Director and Chairman of The Philharmonic Chorus of Tokyo as well as Music Director of Yokohama Sinfonietta and so on in Japan.

He also worked as a Principal Guest Conductor for the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande whose works, a hugely popular series of CDs inspired by dance, have been released as the Pentatone label. And he has also released ten CDs on Fontec as the Tokyo Philharmonic Chorus Music Director.

KATAYAMA Morihide, Ph.D.

Professor at the Faculty of Law at Keio University, music critic

Born in 1963. He graduated from Keio University in 1986 and earned his Ph.D. (political science). His publications include *Onban kogengaku* (Disc Modernology) and *Onban hakubutsushi* (Disc. Museography), a winner of the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities and Hidekazu Yoshida Prize in 2008, and *Mikan no fashizumu: "Motazaru kuni" Nihon no unmei* (Unfinished fascism. Japanese fate a "country without," a winner of the Shiba Ryotaro Prize in 2012).

SAKURA Osamu, Ph.D.

**Professor, Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, The University of Tokyo
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Born in 1960. Earned his Ph.D. in 1992 from Kyoto University. Recent activities include the popularization of science for those without background knowledge. Served as Associate Professor at Yokohama National University (1993–2000) and Visiting Researcher at Freiburg University (1995–96). Has served as Advisory Board member of the academic journal *Biology and Philosophy* since 1998 and *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* since 2010. His publications include *Watashitachi wa dokokara kite dokoe yukunoka?* (Where did we come from and where are we going?) and *Benri wa hitoo fuko ni suru* (Convenient technology does not always make us happy).
