

Seiji Ozawa, longtime conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, dead at 88

Fred Mazelis
12 February 2024

Seiji Ozawa, the Japanese conductor who led the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) for almost 30 years, died in Tokyo last week at the age of 88.

Ozawa recorded prolifically, both with the Boston ensemble as well as in Vienna, San Francisco and elsewhere. He was known, especially in the first half of his career, for his vigor and technique, and was one of the few conductors, aside from Leonard Bernstein, whose name was known outside of classical music circles.

Trained in his youth in the works of Bach, Ozawa went on to conduct the core Germanic symphonic repertoire, including Beethoven, Brahms and Bruckner, as well as 20th century works by Mahler, Stravinsky, Bartok and others. He recorded the entire Mahler cycle of symphonies, including the uncompleted 10th. He commissioned work by contemporary composers like Ligeti and Takemitsu. He was also well known for his championing of work by French composers, including Berlioz, Ravel and Messiaen, and for conducting large-scale compositions, including works that called for chorus as well as orchestra, such as Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, Arthur Schoenberg's late-romantic *Gurre-Lieder*, and Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Ozawa's recording of Olivier Messiaen's massive and little-known *Turangalîla-Symphonie* is one that stands out.

Although Western classical music had come to Japan and China as far back as the late 19th century, Ozawa broke down barriers and prejudices that persisted against Asian conductors, who were sometimes perceived as incapable of fully understanding and interpreting the works of the European masters.

If Ozawa has not been followed by many other Japanese conductors in the West, it is at least partially due to the fact that they have more than enough work in

Japan. Today, Tokyo has eight symphony orchestras, the most of any city in the world. China, Japan and South Korea host many world-class ensembles. The success of Ozawa, in Boston and elsewhere, reflected the growing international character of musical culture in the decades following the Second World War. In this respect, it has accompanied the vast changes in the global economy as well. In the past generation, musicians of East Asian ancestry, especially from China and Korea, have become numerous, if not the majority, in many leading orchestras in the US, including the New York Philharmonic. The prominence of musicians from East Asia also reflects the high level of music education in that part of the world.

Seiji Ozawa was born on September 1, 1935 to Japanese parents in Japanese-occupied northeastern China. An interesting if little-known aspect of his biography is the fact that his father, a dentist, was sympathetic to the Chinese under the brutal occupation by Japanese imperialism. Kaisaku Ozawa was deported back to Japan in 1944, in the middle of the war. Denied a license to practice dentistry, he was instead forced to earn a living as a rice farmer.

Perhaps this family history helped to give the young Ozawa a more international outlook. He showed an interest in and aptitude for music at an early age. At first hoping for a career as a concert pianist, he shifted to conducting after a sports injury when he was still a young teenager. He quickly advanced, and by 1959, when he was still in his early 20s, he won a conducting competition in Besançon, France. There he came to the attention of Charles Munch, who was then music director of the Boston Symphony. Ozawa followed Munch back to the United States.

Ozawa won the Koussevitsky Prize for outstanding student director at Tanglewood, the summer home of

the Boston ensemble. Soon he was being mentored by Leonard Bernstein, who named him as an assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic in 1961. Ozawa was also mentored somewhat later by Herbert von Karajan of the Berlin Philharmonic. A rapid rise in the ranks of young conductors took him to the summer home of the Chicago Symphony in Ravinia (suburban Chicago) and then to Toronto in 1965 and San Francisco in 1969. By 1973 he was in Boston as the music director, his duties in San Francisco overlapping with his first three years in Boston. His 29-year career in Boston would surpass the 25-year tenure (1924-1949) of Serge Koussevitsky, the mentor of the young Leonard Bernstein. Ozawa left Boston in 2002, becoming the chief conductor at the Vienna State Opera for the next eight years.

During his tenure in Boston, Ozawa also divided his time with Japan. Deciding to raise his young children in Japan, he returned to live in Tokyo in the late 1970s. In 1984 he founded the Saito Kinen Orchestra, in honor of his late teacher Hideo Saito. The Saito Kinen Orchestra, since renamed in honor of Ozawa, has become well known around the world.

Ozawa had his critics, especially for the last half of his tenure with the Boston Symphony. There were many who said that his approach had become routine, and that most performances lacked the passion that had attracted attention when he was a young man, known for his unconventional dress and appearance on the podium. Perhaps he was stretching himself too thin, between careers almost 7,000 miles apart.

After having won a reputation for collegial and close relationships with his musicians, Ozawa also faced some tension and disagreements during these years. In the mid-1990s, the conductor, unhappy with programming decisions and other matters at Tanglewood, removed a well-known administrator. In 1997, several highly regarded faculty members at the music center, including pianists Leon Fleisher and Gilbert Kalish, resigned in protest.

One other episode during Ozawa's long tenure at the BSO stands out for its contemporary significance, and the role he played then was a disgraceful one. British actress Vanessa Redgrave, who was then a Trotskyist, was the victim of political blacklisting in 1982, when the BSO canceled her appearance as narrator in Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. Redgrave had become the

object of a hysterical right-wing Zionist campaign because of her outspoken defense of the Palestinians.

When Redgrave sued the BSO for breach of contract and exposed the fact that she had been the victim of blacklisting, Ozawa testified for the orchestra, claiming that music must remain "neutral" on political issues, and using this argument to justify the removal of Redgrave and the cancellation of the entire program. Redgrave's attorneys pointed out, of course, that this was only a dishonest way of punishing those with views the authorities deem unacceptable. Today, more than 40 years later, exactly the same renewed McCarthyism and blacklisting is being used on university campuses and elsewhere, in the US and internationally, as the Zionists and their backers seek to quarantine those who oppose their mass murder of the population in Gaza.

Ozawa's last years were shadowed by ill health, leading to the cancellation of many engagements. He was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2010. While he survived, his health was not fully restored. Back problems also plagued him. His appearances were generally few and far between in the following years. A return to New York leading the Saito Kinen Orchestra in December 2010 had to be scaled back, as did other appearances. He was able to appear in Berlin and Paris in 2016. Traveling for what was to be his last visit to the United States, in 2015 he was awarded a Kennedy Center Honor in Washington D.C.

A selection of Ozawa's recordings:

Beethoven, Choral Fantasy, Op. 80 (with Martha Argerich, piano), from 2015

Beethoven, Symphony No. 9

Brahms Symphony No. 1

Mahler Symphony No. 9



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)