Random Thoughts 40

# Language and Music

During the historically long Golden Week holidays this year, and having completed all my work before they began, I had the luxury of relaxing, reading, and thinking random thoughts. In one of the books I read, *JAPAN STORY* by Christopher Harding, the author wrote about Akiyoshi Toshiko, the brilliant jazz pianist.

“Jazz and democracy shared in common a broader dilemma for their exporters and champions. Both were about freedom and flourishing, improvisation and spontaneity.”

When I read that last sentence I thought: Jazz is like conversation. The best examples of each are spontaneous and extemporaneous in their development and performance.

Certainly both have set pieces; in jazz it is musical keys and certain “riffs” and in conversation there are set phrases, but these are used in creative ways to create unique styles. Just as there are jazz musicians of various styles, so there are also conversationalists noted for their unique styles. As Akiyoshi is reported to have said in the book I mentioned above, jazz comes from the player’s heart more than imitation.

We must not confuse imitation with improvisation. Improvisation is doing something that has already been done, but doing it in a new way. That also requires spontaneity and extemporanity.

Other forms of music also remind me of other types of oral communication. Oratory and rhetoric when stylized in classical forms reminds me of classical music, like that written by Mozart or Beethoven; when speeches are delivered in a more colloquial and “homey” style they remind me of Country & Western music.

Most Japanese impress me as being music lovers; many enjoying karaoke in which quite a few excel in imitating their favorite singers. Seeing how music and oral communication are similar in many ways, I think that following their hearts when it comes to conversation, as good jazz musicians do, then certainly they will become very good conversationalists, too. I think the secret to achieving that is in enjoying doing it.