

UNI-SIGHT

Insights about UNIVA group's Human, Knowledge, and Financial capital



HUMAN INSIGHT

Ballet teaches us to open our hearts. It shouldn't depend on our nationality or family wealth.

ABC-Tokyo Ballet Company Founders Christian Martinu and Rio Mitani

From the Executive Team

Building for Decades to Come Through Individual Resolve and Through Teamwork »

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Christian Martinu



Joined the Vienna State Opera Ballet in 1980. Trained with such famous teachers as Vladimir Tsukanow and Virginia Tsukanova. Founded the Austria Ballet Theater in 1995. Was later active as a dancer and artistic director at several ballet schools in the USA. Moved to Japan in 2003, where with his wife Rio Mitani he founded ABC-Tokyo. In 2012, he received a Special Award for Leadership at the NBA National Ballet Concour.

Rio Mitani



Raised in Vienna from the age of one. Started ballet at the age of seven. After study at the Vienna State Ballet School, she obtained her license as a certified ballet instructor. After dancing in Austria, Alaska, and Seattle, she returned to Japan with her husband and founded ABC-Tokyo. Her broad range of activities both in Japan and abroad includes performing at the 2005 Aichi Expo. At the 2010 Ballet Competition for Youth, she received an Award for Outstanding Leadership.

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Is it possible to learn "real" ballet in Japan?

We are used to thinking of ballet as "an art for aristocrats" or "something European." But in recent years top ballet companies around the world have chosen Japanese for their principal dancers, highlighting the quality of Japanese ballet. That said, these Japanese dancers usually have studied in Europe. To reach the highest level seems to require training in Europe. This view has strong roots in the ballet world in Japan. This is the context in which one ballet school has made its slogan, "Ballet Study in Tokyo."

That school called Austrian Ballet School is the one attached to the ABC-Tokyo Ballet Company (<http://www.abc-tokyo.com/jindex.html>). The founders are dancers trained in that city of the arts Vienna, who have been active as dancers and artistic directors in America and Europe, a married couple whose names are Christian Martinu and Rio Mitani. After they moved to Japan in 2003, they began by teaching in ballet schools and performing as guest dancers. Then, they began to take dancers from Japan to participate in ballet festivals in Vienna. That led to the idea of founding their own ballet company in Tokyo and the establishment of the ABC-Tokyo Ballet Company in



2004.

At the beginning, neither was famous in Japan. They had no networks. They weren't well off. When they talked about starting a ballet company, the Japanese dancers told them that they would have a hard time, that it would be impossible. Most people to whom they spoke responded negatively. Now ABC-Tokyo has been in existence for twelve years. It has become the core of an enterprise that includes a ballet school for children aged 3-11, a ballet school with a course for young adults 12-18, and a school for training ballet teachers, as well as a company for public performances. They have created a system for teaching ballet to individuals of a wide range of ages as well as provide a venue for professional activities.

Ballet instruction: Japan versus Europe

What does it mean to offer a "Ballet Study Abroad" experience in Tokyo? The answer is a merit system focused on real ability. The Austrian Ballet School attached to ABC-Tokyo was established in 2009, to offer professional-level technique and preparation, instead of the usual lessons or hobby approach. In this authentic ballet school environment, children with recognized talent receive full scholarships and can, thus, pursue professional careers without having to worry about money. Many become fully qualified dancers and members of ballet companies outside of Japan. The school has produced many graduates recognized as world-class dancers.

The scholarship program is not concerned solely with addressing the question of cost. In Europe, where ballet is recognized as fine art, talented young dancers are always provided with instruction at no cost to themselves. That is how schools attract talent and create an attractive market. The difference between that system and the one current in Japan is clear as night and day. Japanese ballet schools depend on students entry fees and monthly fees for their economic survival, plus additional fees for performing. For dancers' debut performances, the fees for participation, costumes, and pas de deux partners require several hundred thousand yen. These costs are all assumed by ballet in Japan. Students must also purchase tickets to performances and are then

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responsible to selling them to others or, if they cannot sell them, giving them to others. Christian and Rio, who had trained in Vienna, felt keenly how far out of reach ballet had become for many talented children.



Thus, when they founded ABC-Tokyo, they decided that there would be no additional financial burden for participating in performances. They wanted to create a place where talented young Japanese could feel free to take ballet seriously. That is what they created.

Knowing the world, they can teach ballet in ways suitable for Japanese

Concerning how ballet is taught, ABC-Tokyo has its own unique method. “Our approach combines the elegance of Russian ballet with world-class technique. That said, what we studied in Vienna was Russian ballet, and purely Russian methods are not suitable for Japanese bodies. Dancers with Japanese bodies could too easily suffer injuries, making it difficult for them to perform on a global level. Instead, we created our own method, drawing both on deep understanding of Russian ballet and on our personal experience, to create a method better suited to Japanese. Using this method, dancers can learn how to raise their legs higher, to spin, and to jump higher. They can acquire these key elements of Russian ballet without risk of injury,” says Rio. “Our method is unique in that it trains our students to be able to dance anywhere in the world. We use the slogan ‘Ballet Study in Tokyo,’ to draw a clear line between our schools and other ballet schools.”

What is “world class” ballet?

When we ask this couple, who have devoted their lives together to ballet, what is most important for the ballet dancer, we hear a surprising answer: “A tender desire to communicate something to others. Those who only dance for themselves may have outstanding technique, but there is a limit to how far they can train their bodies. The people who are world class in any field are those who feel deeply that what they do is for others. They are filled with gratitude, they hope to achieve something with others, and they want to benefit others. World class dancers always have something about them that transcends beauty alone. What makes them truly extraordinary is that they do what they do “for the sake of others,” says Rio. Plus, adds Christian, “There is spiritual endurance, the ability to persevere. Every career has ups and downs. If people lose their passions when things go poorly, that is the end. Emotional stamina is very important.”

When teaching ballet, these two are careful to teach more than ballet alone. “It isn’t just ballet. We want to help individuals to expand their potential and realize their dreams. We are, of course, proud of our graduates who now dance with famous ballet companies outside of Japan. What makes us happiest, however, is, for example, to help a shy child become stronger and to themselves be able to encourage other shy children. To see them grow in that way is what delights us most.”

They try to provide “life lessons” and will invite guest speakers to talk on such topics as “Why are we alive?” during breaks in their ballet classes. They want, via ballet, to teach these lessons to their

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students. "We want to give children lots of encouragement."



Finally, we asked, what is their next dream? "We want to integrate the ballet school for children, the youth ballet school, and the performances in a single group, instead of treating them separately as we have so far. We want to build a vertically integrated system that stretches from the ballet school for children to training ballet teachers. For our dreams to have a future, it is vital to have successors. That is why we train instructors. That is why we don't just teach knowledge and methods. Heart, we ourselves must embody that heart." They see clearly the future on which they are focused.

After the interview: What can our NAKAMA learn?

- Christian and Rio say that their achievement of which they are proudest is seeing their students grow as human beings. Because I found this answer unexpected, I focused on finding out why as the interview continued. The pursuit of art is usually accompanied by passion, loneliness and madness. Only those who are, in some sense, not whole or healthy can pursue such a twisting, dangerous road. We have learned, however, that to become a top class ballet dancer first requires becoming a top class human being. This same iron principle, "First, be a good person" applies to business as well as art.

- Christian started ballet when he was fifteen. He noticed the similarity between learning ballet and learning kung fu, and was able to employ what he had learned from kung fu to ballet. That is how he became a member of the Vienna State Opera Ballet. Rio suffered many disappointments because of the demerits of her Asian body. Then she met a teacher who believed in her. Her confidence blossomed. She developed a style in which her shortcomings became her strengths. She became a heretic. The shortcomings, the places in which she was different from other

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dancers, ceased to matter. Given self-confidence, they were transformed into strengths that others lacked.

· This couple wanted to bring “real” ballet to Japan. What they meant by “real” was a ballet system like the one that Rio herself experienced in which students could develop their talents without the burden of financial pressure. This would be a revolution in the world of ballet in Japan. Achieving it wasn’t easy. But both were fully committed because of their love of ballet. Love was their motivation. Love is tenacity. We, too, must discover what we love and must cling to.

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