

The organ and disaster relief: An American organist in Japan

Roger W. Lowther



Roger Lowther at outdoor concert

The train slammed to a hard stop, almost throwing me to the floor. "We are experiencing an earthquake. Please wait a moment," came the voice from the intercom system of the Tokyo subway car. Earthquakes are a part of life in Japan, but no one expected anything like this. It was one of the five largest earthquakes in world history, creating a tsunami that went up to heights of 124 feet and traveled as far inland as six miles! An estimated 30,000 people died and 125,000 buildings were destroyed. Whole towns were wiped out, never to be rebuilt. The overall destruction exceeded \$300 billion, making it the costliest natural disaster in human history. The second-largest nuclear disaster since Chernobyl on top of all this forever poisoned the homes of thousands and crippled the fishing economy all up and down the coast. The day of the quake on 3/11 will stick in the minds of Japanese people for a generation to come as powerfully as 9/11 does for every American.

What part does the organ play in disaster relief? It was not a question I immediately tried to answer, as I was overwhelmed with responding to the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. But as it so happened, the very first shelter to which I brought supplies three days after the earthquake had an old electronic keyboard in the corner. When I mentioned to the shelter manager that I was a musician, everyone started to set up chairs and gather around the keyboard. Once I started playing, they didn't want me to stop.

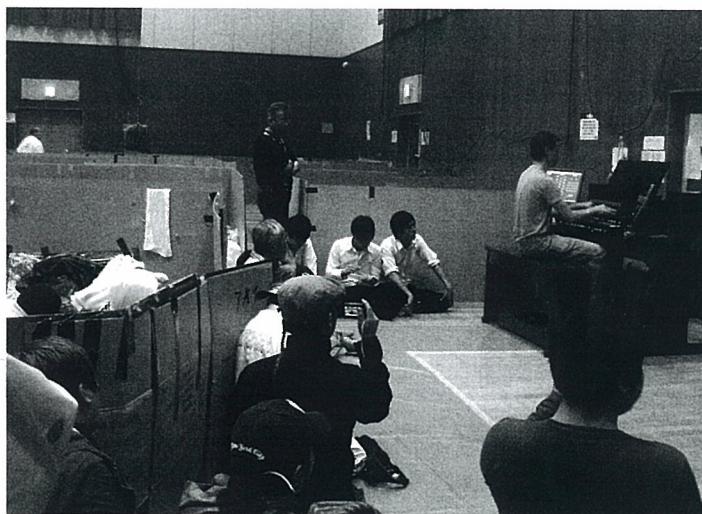
Due to the generous giving of individuals and a foundation, I received a portable Hauptwerk digital organ from Classic Organ Works last year. A portable organ can be taken anywhere. Anywhere! Why not to all the schools, hotels, sports complexes, community centers, and even outdoors in front of homes where people shelter? Almost 100,000 people still resided in shelters three months after the earthquake, grief-stricken and unable to move forward with their lives. A most important part of concerts seems to be the building of relationships. After hearing us play, people are willing to open up to us with their lives and their stories.

I stared in awe as I heard one survivor tell of seeing the tsunami coming and making it to the shelter just ten seconds before the water hit, or another man who survived while floating around in his car! I was brought to tears by one lady who told me how she lost all three of her children, ages 8, 10, and 13, as they were coming home from school. A teenage boy told me how he lost his baby sister, and a teenage girl how she lost both her parents. Everybody who survived in those areas knows many family members, friends, and neighbors who died.

Overlooking the city of Ishinomaki, one of the worst-hit cities in the region where over 6,000 people died, is a large hill topped with a shrine and large *torii* gate. Throngs of people gather there every day to write their prayers and tie flowers to the gate. Having a portable organ has allowed me to take the organ into places I would never dream possible, including right next to that gate. Setting the organ to its highest volume, I played away at Widor's Toccata, Bach's E-Minor Prelude and Fugue, Japanese folk songs, and an improvisation. I explained how the melody of the fugue is "wedged" in a melodic box of Bach's own making, yet breaks through those barriers with a message of hope and freedom amidst adversity.

So far I've led 24 concerts in shelters with other Tokyo-based professional musicians. The set-up of my portable digital organ never fails to draw crowds and comments. "What is that?" they ask. "An organ." You can see the look of disbelief on their faces. "How much did it cost?" someone always asks. "About the same as a small car." They shake their heads in amazement, but nothing compares to their reactions once they actually hear it. One lady was overwhelmingly impressed with the low sounds of the pedal. A shelter manager once told me, "You've turned our gymnasium into a beautiful cathedral." People always send me away with "Please come back, and play longer next time!"

I have witnessed dramatic changes in the mood of a shelter during the course of a concert. "Bravo!" and "Wonderful!" ring through the air in a festive way. Children come up to play with me. People repeatedly break down in tears



Roger Lowther at Iwaki concert

as some deal with their grief for the very first time. As a thank-you, one energetic 84-year-old gentleman sang local traditional songs for us, bringing cheers from everyone in the shelter. One broken-down community center was transformed for a little while into an elegant concert hall as the music transcended the surroundings.

On May 11 at 2:46 pm, a moment of silence gripped every shelter in northern Japan. It was the two-month anniversary of the devastating tsunami, and I had a unique opportunity to be at the Onagawa Nuclear Power Plant and perform for the 80 refugees housed there. The security was so intense that the license plate numbers and names of every passenger traveling with me had to be given three days in advance. At the gate, it took some effort to explain that all the electronic gear in the back of the van was really an organ.

When we finally made it through to the shelter near the base of a cooling tower, the mood was incredibly somber, and I realized the usual upbeat beginning to a concert was far from appropriate. Bruce Huebner, a graduate of the top conservatory in Japan, was traveling with me and came up with the brilliant idea to call out a melody from one side of the gymnasium on his Japanese bamboo flute. Steve Sacks echoed a varied response from the other side of the room on the saxophone. Calls and responses of comforting melodies criss-crossed the room, mesmerizing us with their healing power. As we were leaving, one of the junior high girls got up the courage to start playing her flute. Bruce and Steve quickly joined in and before long a whole group of adults was

joyfully dancing in their celebration of life! You can see a short video clip of this amazing moment on my blog: <<http://rogerlowther.blogspot.com>>.

At the International Arts Movement conference in New York City, Jeremy Begbie spoke of music bringing "relief" in our broken world. He said,

In a world that is so obviously not as it ought to be, it is the calling of artists to be agents of a new world, a redeemed world. Whenever we start to believe that nothing can ever be different, that our homes, relationships, careers are basically stuck in a groove and can never change and never will change . . . whenever we start to believe that the horrors of the world just have to be, the emaciated child compelled to beg at a road side, or the prostitute forced to the streets to feed her drug addiction. Whenever we start to believe that there can never be anything new under the sun, it's the artist's calling to make us believe things can be different, that life can be new, that a new world is possible, a world that ought to be.

Do you also have great stories of the role of the organ in disaster relief? I would love to hear about them! Please send me an e-mail: <rogerlowther@gmail.com>.

Roger Lowther serves as the Artist in Residence with Grace City Church, a new church plant seeking to reach young professionals working in the area around Tokyo station. He received a Master of Music degree in organ performance from the Juilliard School, where he studied with John Weaver. He lives with his wife Abi and three small boys in downtown Tokyo. You can read more about their work in Japan at <missionart.org> and <rogerlowther.blogspot.com>.

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