

Covid-19 and Ballet Production in Japan: The Impact of the Crisis

Covid-19 und die Ballettproduktion in Japan: Die Auswirkungen der Krise

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Abstract

This article delves into the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the landscape of ballet production in Japan, with a particular focus on the experiences of the Japan Performing Arts Foundation (NBS). The paper examines the challenges faced by the NBS and other cultural organizations, shedding light on their efforts to adapt to the crisis. It explores the response of the Japanese government, particularly the financial aid programs introduced by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the response of artists, and argues that both government support for ballet and artist advocacy increased because of and during the COVID crisis and further describes the innovation and temporization of both.

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Auswirkungen der COVID-19-Pandemie auf die Ballettproduktion in Japan, insbesondere mit den Erfahrungen der Japan Performing Arts Foundation (NBS) liegt. Der Beitrag untersucht die Herausforderungen, mit denen die NBS und andere kulturelle Organisationen angesichts der Pandemie konfrontiert waren, beleuchtet ihre Bemühungen, die Krise zu meistern und untersucht die Maßnahmen der japanischen Regierung, mit dem Fokus auf die finanziellen Hilfsprogramme des Amts für kulturelle Angelegenheiten sowie die Reaktion der Künstler darauf. Er zeigt, dass die staatliche Unterstützung für das Ballett sowie das Engagement der Künstler für mehr staatliche Unterstützung wegen und während der COVID-Krise zugenommen haben.

Keywords

cultural production, cultural organizations, cultural policy, social change, arts organizations

Introduction

In Japan, engagement in arts and culture, whether by creation or consumption, is often regarded as a private, and not a state matter, and as having little significance for society at large (KAWASHIMA 2020). Despite being declared a cultural state (*bunka kokka*) in its constitution of

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1947, most people and policymakers in Japan lack the perception that culture should be actively promoted by the state (IKEDA 2010). However, in 2020, for the first time in its history, Japan allocated a substantial amount of public funds to cultural activities and institutions, revising and doubling the initial cultural budget of 2020. Nonetheless, artists' associations criticized the cultural budget and the programs it supported (BUNKA GEIJUTSU SUISHIN FÖRAMU 2021; GEIDANKYÖ 2022) demanding "structural changes in policy and an expansion of state cultural support" (LEE ET AL. 2021: 2).

This article elucidates the reasons behind this demand, its cultural and economic contexts, and its outcome, focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the supportive measures implemented by the Japanese government on the performing arts sector in Japan. The article argues that the Japanese government became more supportive of ballet due to COVID 19; that artists in Japan were galvanized by COVID 19 to make demands; and that the results were improvements in cultural policy, and insights into the need for more effective government support for ballet and arts in general.

My particular focus is the Japan Performing Arts Foundation, referred to here as NBS, an acronym derived from the Foundation's Japanese name, *Nihon butai geijutsu shinkōkai*, and widely known in Japan. The selection of NBS as a focus is motivated by its status as the foremost private non-profit producer of ballet and opera, on an international scale, in Japan. Further, the Tokyo Ballet was one of the most active companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ballet productions by NBS, alongside an examination of relief programs instituted by the Japanese government and specific implications for NBS in 2020 and 2021. It also sheds light on the characteristics of ballet productions in Japan in general, which have enjoyed little governmental financial support. Ballet in Japan is traditionally commercially produced, a situation that is generally true for the production of all art and culture in Japan. In the midst of the crisis, it became clear how little the governmental measures were tailored to the situations of artists, and that without long-term governmental support, cultural enterprises could no longer be maintained. The non-profit sector, which includes NBS as well as other small organizations and individuals with a weak financial base, play the central role in supporting culture. As these cultural organizations are dependent on admission fee revenue, diminishing audiences due to the COVID-19 restrictions, cancellations of performances, and uncertainty as to how to

overcome the crisis, led to louder demands for long-term financial support tailored to the situation of cultural organizations. Demands such as these, brought about advocacy by NBS for structural changes in cultural policy in this essay, as well as advocacy by other artists and artists groups as well as expansions in state cultural financial support.

The Context and Import of the Question

The Covid crisis as a phenomenon and its impact across the arts and culture has been widely studied at a general level (DE PEUTER et al. 2023), at the level of the performing arts (CHATZICHRISTODOULOU et al. 2022; AEBISCHER/GRAY 2024), with regard to dance production outside Japan (BAYBUTT et al. 2021), and with regard to ballet production specifically, outside Japan (KAHN 2021; BATISTA et al. 2022). Japan, however, stands out in three key areas with regard to the arts before the COVID crisis. It had an especially low budget for the arts, it was characterized by extreme privatization of the sector, and in its capacity for artist advocacy was very limited. Responses to the crisis at the governmental level and at the level of the artists and their organizations in Japan in the context of one particular art form and in one organization, as represented in this essay, thus presents a specific examination of the effects of the crisis, including the opportunities it created in an especially limited and disinterested political, economic, and cultural framework. The article thus provides insights into possibilities for increased cultural funding in one sector, as well as insights into artists' responses in a particular geopolitical cultural situation. Such insights are especially valuable since government valuation of the arts has declined in many places, including the United States and German-speaking countries (KIRCHBERG/ZEMBYLAS 2022). It remains to be seen which of the changes and opportunities will survive long past COVID, but the close examination provided here can provide clues at the meso- and macro-levels of analysis for future points of relevance. This example is also noteworthy because it marks the first significant increase in financial support for artists in the history of Japanese cultural policy, which previously focused two thirds of its cultural budget on the preservation of cultural properties.

Cultural Policy in Japan

Following World War II, Japan's domestic policy primarily prioritized economic development, and it was not until 1959 that the Ministry of Education commenced subsidizing the arts. The lack of proactive measures in promoting performing arts is an enduring characteristic of Japanese cultural policy since the establishment of the modern nation-state in the latter half of the 19th century. Japanese cultural policies have stipulated that the promotion of arts and culture should only be actively pursued when stable economic conditions have been achieved. In fact, up until the 1980s, Japan did not have a true national cultural policy. Instead, professionals in the performing arts sector took the initiative to organize on their own (KAWASHIMA 2012). Private enterprises and production companies produced opera and ballet performances and engaged in the production by artists and companies from abroad, as exemplified by NBS. Government cultural policy measures, in contrast, focused support on the preservation of cultural artifacts; policymakers were seemingly reluctant to promote the performing arts at all. This is also reflected in the fact that none of the six Japanese National Theatres finance a resident company to promote the performing arts, as national theatres in other countries generally do (WILMER 2008). Against this backdrop, and with significantly less government financial support than in European countries, ballet is nonetheless produced and performed in Japan. In the next section, I take a closer look at ballet production in Japan to provide context for looking at cultural policy issues.

Ballet Production in Japan

Japanese ballet productions are predominantly characterized as semi-professional, primarily showcasing the accomplishments of ballet school pupils. Only a few, such as the Tokyo Ballet Company, manage to achieve economic viability. The ballet world is largely organized under the Japan Ballet Association (*Nihon barē kyōkai*) which was established in 1957, and which comprises more than 2500 members, including ballet dancers, choreographers, and ballet masters and mistresses (JAPAN BALLET ASSOCIATION n.d.). However, no professional qualification system, no qualifying exams or grades, nor any licensing system for ballet teachers or ballet schools and companies exists. Japan lacks official records documenting either the number of ballet studios or the percentage of the

population engaged in learning ballet (ONO 2016). The ballet training program at the New National Theatre established in 2001, featuring a comprehensive two-year professional program designed for an average cohort of six young dancers, typically aged between 17 and 19 at enrollment, was the first of its kind after the establishment of the New National Theatre in 1997. Additionally, a two-year pre-professional program is offered to a maximum of six dancers, with a minimum age requirement of 15 (NEW NATIONAL THEATRE 2022). As the New National Theatre does not maintain a permanent ballet company, graduates of this program face an uncertain future similar to those who complete training at private ballet schools. This situation also highlights the government's lack of interest in providing long-term support for ballet dancers. The absence of professional qualifications and the lack of opportunities for long-term contracts with a government-funded company further illustrate the government's minimal interest in ballet.

Consistent with prevailing practices in other ballet companies like the Tokyo Ballet Company, the New National Theatre ballet company contracts dancers for one year only, rather than housing a resident *corps de ballet*, as most of the National Theatres in Europe do. The support policy for ballet adopted by the Japanese government reflects its inclination towards limited financial backing for performing arts and leaves the responsibility for productions predominantly to the private sector. Regarding subsidies, ballet companies and other performing arts groups may apply for grants from the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) on an annual basis. Established in 1968, the ACA operates as an extra-ministerial bureau under the purview of the Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. Its grant allocations are decided by a commission of experts and include decisions on the extent of financial support and its recipients. These grant programs have faced criticism for their perceived lack of clear criteria and overarching visions, with concerns raised regarding their perceived arbitrariness and dependence on the personal preferences of reviewers (KAWASHIMA 2012). Therefore, the framework for ballet productions, as defined by the above-mentioned cultural policy, primarily relies on private initiatives. Project-based funding requires new applications to be repeatedly submitted to the ACA, resulting in producers like NBS having no reliable financial support from the government. In this context, the restrictions and cancellations of performances—and thus income—due to COVID-19 measures posed significant challenges for ballet producers (TAKAHASHI 2021). The following section briefly introduces the history and production structure

of NBS, situating the foundation within Japan's ballet landscape to illustrate the conditions under which the government's financial support programs could be implemented.

The Japan Performing Arts Foundation (Nihon butai geijutsu shinkokai, NBS)

In 1957, Sasaki Tadatsugu (1933–2016), the manager and impresario of the Tokyo Ballet Company founded the opera stage management organization called Japan Art Staff Inc., the predecessor of NBS. In 1960 he established the Tokyo Ballet Company to perpetuate the legacy of the Tchaikovsky Memorial Tokyo Ballet School, which had been inaugurated with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Soviet Union in 1960 but had failed financially one year later. Sasaki aimed at institutionalizing a professional ballet ensemble in Japan and at elevating the social status of ballet dancers within the Japanese performing arts scene. Notably, in the 1960s, ballet in Japan predominantly existed more as a hobby than a professional performing art (SASAKI 2001). Consequently, most ballet troupes operated as semi-professional entities, often resulting in precarious living conditions for performers due to uncertain and irregular income, a situation that persists in the 21st century, as evidenced by a survey conducted by the Japan Council of Performers Rights and Performing Arts Organizations (*Geidankyō*) in 2021 (TAKAHASHI K. 2021; Geidankyō 2022).

Before the foundation of the NBS in 1981, the Tokyo Ballet, under the management of Sasaki, had firmly established itself as a leading professional ballet company in Japan, and had also gained international acclaim. As one of the professional companies with stable, regular performances at home and abroad, the Tokyo Ballet played a central role in the Japanese ballet world. Up until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ballet company had an annual repertoire of six to ten productions, and its soloists made notable appearances on stages across the globe (NBS 2014). In 1980, due to disagreements about performances by foreign opera companies, Sasaki terminated a collaboration with Association for Music for All (*Minshu ongaku kyōkai*), an audience organization that had provided the Tokyo Ballet Company with performance opportunities and facilitated international opera productions under his management. The same year, the formerly favorable relations with the Soviet Union, which had facilitated close ties to esteemed Russian instructors for the

Tokyo Ballet and performances in Russia, turned unfavorable. In 1980, Sasaki faced suspicion of supporting the defection of Sulamith Messerer to Great Britain. Messerer had been a prominent Russian ballerina, choreographer, and primary instructor of the Tokyo Ballet (SASAKI 2001). These developments made it necessary for Sasaki to reorganize his performing arts productions, resulting in the foundation of the Japan Performing Arts Foundation, or NBS, in 1981. In 2003, operational responsibilities for NBS were transferred from Sasaki to Takahashi Norio as the new executive director.

NBS is based on three pillars: The production of ballet performances by the Tokyo Ballet Company, the presentation of performances by foreign ballet and opera companies in Japan, and the operation of the Tokyo Ballet School (NBS 2022a). In 2005, the NBS became a Designated Organization for the Promotion of Public Interest (*tokutei kōeki zōshin hō-jin*), a function bestowed by the Japan's Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. As of April 1, 2011, aligning with the government's initiative to reform incorporated public interest foundations, the NBS became a Public Interest Incorporated Foundation (*kōeki zaidan hōjin*) (NBS 2022). This development facilitated solicitation of donations from both individuals and corporations.

Domestic performances of the Tokyo Ballet did and do receive financial support by the government. In 2012, however, these subsidies amounted to only 4% of its budget (TAKAHASHI 2012). According to the management of NBS, the subsidies received from the Agency of Cultural Affairs for the fiscal year 2019, which predates the onset of COVID-19, constituted 10% of its total income. In contrast, the financial support extended by the government in fiscal 2021 increased to 35% of NBS's annual income. This notable shift can be attributed to a consistent absolute subsidy amount, with the observed increase arising from reduced expenditures incurred by NBS. The inability to host international opera productions in the wake of COVID-19 led to decreased spending, thereby raising the proportion of government support to the institution, but the increase did not compensate for opera and ballet productions from overseas that had to be cancelled due to pandemic measures (TAKAHASHI 2022). When assessing changes in support for the arts in relation to COVID, one must be careful not to interpret accidental increases, which are nominal only, as real changes. It should be noted that the financial aid programs could only be applied to domestic productions. Guest performances abroad, such as those regularly given by the Tokyo Ballet and managed by NBS, as well as performances by foreign troupes and

artists, were excluded from the aid packages. This shows that, although the significant increase in the cultural budget had a positive impact, it was not tailored to all areas. Nevertheless, definite positive changes in support did come about. The following section deals with NBS's experiences during the initial two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding relief measures implemented by the government.

Governmental support programs and the Japan Performing Arts Foundation (NBS)

The PIA Research Institute annually releases data on the dimensions of the music and stage entertainment market in Japan, showing a consistent and incremental growth in this commercially driven sector since the inception of its survey in 2000. In 2019, preceding the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the aggregate value of the stage and music entertainment market reached 629.5 billion yen, with 205.8 billion yen attributed to the music sector and 423.7 billion yen to stage entertainment. This marked a noteworthy 7.4% increase compared to the preceding year (PIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE 2021) signifying a flourishing state commercial entertainment domain when the initial anti-coronavirus measures were implemented. In contrast, a 2021 study conducted by the Forum for the Promotion of Culture and the Arts revealed a stark decline of 58% in operating revenues in the ballet sector during fiscal year 2020 in comparison to 2019 (BUNKA GEIJUTSU SUISHIN FŌRAMU 2021). This stark contrast underscores the profound and adverse impact of COVID-19 on ballet in Japan.

On February 26, 2020, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō issued a directive urging all theatres to voluntarily suspend performances, declaring in a press conference that these were “nonessential” (*fuyō fukyū*) activities (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE OF JAPAN n.d.). Originally intended to last for a two-week period, the situation evolved, and on April 7, a state of emergency was officially declared in Tokyo and six additional prefectures. Subsequently, on April 16, these restrictions were extended nationwide. The state of emergency persisted until May 25. 50 percent admission restrictions, which had been imposed on theatres were not lifted until September 19, 2020.

In the first month of the COVID-19 crisis, artists, dispirited by the characterization of their work by the government as nonessential, began to unite. Despite the competitive nature of the performing arts scene,

collaborative efforts emerged with groups of artists submitting joint applications for Corona grants, such as ballet companies for the Art Caravan program, described below. Further, and significantly, the organization Japan Performing Arts Solidarity Network (JPASN) was established in 2020 and comprises 100 participating organizations and 20 endorsing organizations. JPASN was formed to look at ways to continue performances under pandemic restrictions, and described its mission in this way:

Beyond our differences, we are coming together in solidarity, working together and sharing information to fight for the survival of the profession and to make sure we can safely reopen and rebuild our industry. Our goal is not just to protect the economy of the industry and the survival of individual groups, but to protect the profession as a whole and ultimately to safeguard the future of Japanese culture. (JPASN n.d.)

This clearly shows how much artists had seen themselves as being on their own, and that they had hardly expected any substantial help from the public sector to overcome the crisis. Yet now, probably for the first time, the Japanese cultural scene resonated with a unified voice, asserting that in a democratic society, socially relevant art and culture necessitate clear and fair guidelines for financial aid and, most importantly, reliable support. At the same time, the Agency for Cultural Affairs expanded the scope of its support programs aiming to reach a broader range of artists and cultural institutions than ever before.

Despite such galvanization and concomitant changes, the crisis also brought acute problems for the ballet sector. Following the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's call to refrain from performances on a voluntary basis, and the nationwide proclamation of a state of emergency in April, live performances became impossible for the Tokyo Ballet. In total, eight productions by the NBS had to be either canceled or postponed due to government-imposed restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. The canceled events were mainly productions invited from abroad, for which most of the tickets had already been sold, and for which concert halls and opera houses had already been rented by NBS. Likewise, due to travelling restrictions at home and worldwide, the ballet company had to cancel all performances abroad. Nevertheless, during the first year of the pandemic, the Tokyo Ballet Company was able to realize eight programs, canceling only two. Paradoxically, in 2021, amid the ongoing pandemic, the number of domestic performances the company produced actually increased. This unexpected increase can be attributed to the unique conditions stipulated by governmental support

programs created in reaction to the crisis. Specifically, compliance with the terms of financial support programs necessitated the production of additional performances. This presented the company with other problems however, as financial aid was only granted for new programs, a requirement that was almost impossible to meet under the restrictive conditions. How NBS dealt with this situation is exemplified by the ARTS for the Future and the Art Caravan programs.

ARTS for the Future

The ARTS for the Future program received funding from the government's third supplementary budget, which was approved in fiscal year 2020 spanning from April 2020 through March 2021. This initiative consisted of subsidies aimed at fostering culture and the arts under the category of "support for the enhancement of cultural and artistic activities to overcome the Corona pandemic" (ARTS FOR THE FUTURE 2022). Projects eligible for subsidies, including performances and exhibitions, had to be executed between January 8, and December 31 of 2021. The grants were designed to bolster organizations actively involved in public performances, exhibitions, and other activities accessible to the general public, with the intention of generating ticket revenues and additional income.

The subsidy was accessible to domestic arts and culture-related organizations, as well as to the proprietors or operators of cultural facilities in Japan, excluding local public organizations. The maximum subsidy amount per organization was 25 million yen, and specific subsidy categories ranging from 6 million to 25 million yen were determined based on factors such as the number of individuals involved in performances, and the organizational size. Throughout 2021, two application periods were designated, one from the end of April to the end of May and another during September. Out of a total of 11,200 applications received, financial support was granted to 7,024 projects (ARTS FOR THE FUTURE 2022).

The primary challenge associated with this program stemmed from its restriction on using funds to finance ballet performances that had already been planned or which had necessitated postponement. A prerequisite for eligibility for this subsidy was the initiation of new projects or the introduction of innovations in performance practices. Faced with these conditions, producers and organizations, including NBS, found

themselves compelled to devise creative solutions, given the impracticality of launching entirely new productions amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these seemingly incongruous additional requirements, NBS and other relevant entities adopted innovative measures and strategic responses. For instance, the Tokyo Ballet Company squeezed in an extra performance of *The Pirate* with an added behind-the-scenes tour, in order to meet the previously planned or postponed requirement. The grant provided by the program covered 15% of the extra production's costs, and thus rendered it profitable (TAKAHASHI 2021; YONEZU 2022).

In summary, the ARTS for the Future program diverged from providing support for existing or pre-scheduled performances, which was previously deemed desirable by Takahashi Norio (TAKAHASHI 2021). Instead, the program exclusively focused on co-financing new and supplementary performances. Consequently, this emphasis resulted in an increased number of performances and, correspondingly, more stage opportunities for the 76 company dancers. The impact was positive for individual dancers, many of whom held side jobs such as teaching positions that had been canceled during the pandemic (TAKAHASHI 2021). This showed that increased government funding for professional ballet productions could relieve dancers of the need to finance themselves with part-time jobs, which are particularly burdensome for the artists. More reliable long-term financial security for dancers and production companies, by the government, could thus foster greater creativity given that artists would not have to worry as much about earning a living, but could concentrate more fully on their art instead.

In regard to governmental support for individual dancers, the second supplementary budget provided a distinct financial subsidy for freelancer artists with a maximum allocation of 200,000 yen. Criticisms were directed towards the program for its perceived lack of user-friendliness, primarily stemming from its nature as a subsidy intended to cover costs of artistic activities rather than a versatile financial support for such things as living expenses. Moreover, a stipulation was that the incurred expenses must exceed the maximum amount by fifty percent, compelling artists to expend 300,000 yen in artistic activities to qualify for the 200,000-yen financial aid. Such a requirement was particularly onerous in light of the decrease in working opportunities due to the pandemic. Notably, though members of the Tokyo Ballet company did utilize this program to procure ballet shoes and related equipment, they nevertheless expressed a strong preference for receiving support directed towards

their livelihoods (TAKAHASHI 2021). Here again the limitations of a simple formula of more government support creating better performance conditions and more public support are evident, demonstrating the need for thoughtful planning of support programs and the input of artists. Such uninformed support was attributed to the expedited development of programs coupled with a limited understanding of the scale of the arts and culture industry, as acknowledged by the Agency for Cultural Affairs itself (ACA 2022). As a consequence of the crisis, the Agency for Cultural Affairs took initiative in fiscal year 2021 by establishing the Office for Strengthening Infrastructure for Cultural and Artistic Activities (*Bunka geijutsu katsudō kiban kyōkashitsu*). This office embarked on surveys and analyses to comprehend the situation effectively, with the goal of creating opportunities for artists operating within a flexible employment system and their supporters. Despite the Agency's recognition of the imperative to address the highly volatile and precarious conditions in the production of arts and culture, concrete initiatives for implementation did not yet materialize.

Art Caravan Program

The impact of the Japanese government's support program on ballet production in Japan can also be exemplified by the Art Caravan Program. In the initial supplementary budget for fiscal year 2020, this program allocated 1.3 billion yen with the aim of revitalizing the arts sector by joining together art organizations, artists, performers, and local public organizations to organize cultural events throughout Japan (ACA 2021).

The program provided subsidies for two distinct project categories:

1. nationwide implementation of high-quality performances (large-scale performance category)
2. implementation of artistic activities in collaboration with local organizations and artists (community collaboration category)

Subsidies under the first type were contingent upon the orchestration of large-scale, high-quality performing arts performances by umbrella organizations actively advancing Japan's arts and culture. These umbrella organizations had specific prerequisites, including establishing status-of-legal-person, a documented constitution, a formal act of endowment, and internal rules setting out the organizational framework

as well as an accounting infrastructure and official place of business. Projects had to be executed across a spectrum of six to twenty regions with a stipulated upper limit of 650 million yen allocated per project, as outlined in the Art Caravan guidelines of 2022 (ART CARAVAN 2022). The Association of Japanese Ballet Companies (*Nihon barē renmei*) is the umbrella organization of Japanese ballet companies. It was established in 2014 as Japan's first national organization of ballet companies and has eight members and one associate member. On behalf of its eight regular member companies, the association applied for aid under the first category of the Art Caravan Program, that is, large scale performance, and was successful in securing a comprehensive support package of 962.8 million yen for its project Ballet Brings Hope to the Nation. Recovering from the Corona Pandemic Project (HOPE JAPAN 2021). Executing a special tour called Hope Japan 2021, seven association ballet companies conducted a total of 31 performances. In fiscal 2022 the Association of Japanese Ballet Companies received 63.5 million yen from the Art Caravan program for its project Ballet Brings Hope to the Nation: Art Caravan Project by the Association of Japanese Ballet Companies. Within this framework the Tokyo Ballet again organized Hope Japan 2022 Japan National Tour and also a Nutcracker National Tour. The focus was on regions not visited on the previous tour with twelve performances in eleven cities (ART CARAVAN n.d.). Like NBS however, all members of the Association of Japanese Ballet Companies rent performance venues and work in collaboration with venue staff. In other words, the rather limited financial support for the performing arts, from the public sector, remains clear.

In response to the challenges faced by local authorities operating theatre and concert houses, including the lack of resident companies, a designated management system (*shitei kanri seido*) was instituted in 2003. The system enables local authorities to delegate management of their cultural facilities to private organizations (NISHIMATSU 2014). Private entrepreneurs and organizations contribute either full or partial financing, thereby assuming complete responsibility for ensuring profitability. This business model then signifies a partial privatization of the performing arts in public venues in Japan. The primary aim was reduction of personnel costs and outsourcing of personnel in cultural facilities (KOBAYASHI 2013). Implementation did not ensure that theatres and music halls would flourish, particularly in instances where establishments lacked adequate prior, or other funding and business expertise. The frequent turnover of management personnel, occurring every three to five

years, added challenges. A substantial portion of the annual budget is allocated to venue maintenance, making it increasingly challenging, with a limited budget and increasing production costs, to produce performances that attract a sizable audience. Productions deemed less appealing result in financial losses, perpetuating a detrimental cycle characterized by insufficient funds, less attractive programs, and a diminishing audience. Further, a 2018 survey conducted by the Association of Public Theatres and Halls revealed that, in terms of professional human resources, 72.2% of respondents acknowledged inadequate reliability of qualified persons (ZENKOKU KŌRITSU BUNKA SHISETSU KYŌKAI 2020).

Despite the imposition of the *shitei kanri seido*, the Art Caravan program has demonstrated a positive impact on theatres struggling to produce high quality performances, particularly in the context of NBS. The Tokyo Ballet's performances under the Art Caravan program, spanning various locations across Japan, served to establish connections between regional theatres and halls with a highly skilled and renowned production and marketing entity, namely NBS. This combination of professional production with business knowledge and regional theatre venues resulted in more adept marketing for the performances and thus in sold-out programs at these regional venues. Testimonials from the management of these regional theatres further corroborate the success and efficacy of this initiative. For instance, Amanuma Hikaru, the Deputy Director and Director of Operations at the Yokosuka Arts Theatre, conveyed that, thanks to Art Caravan, the theatre successfully executed an expansive promotional campaign for its December 2021 Nutcracker production that would have been unfeasible under normal budget constraints. Consequently, they achieved nearly full audience capacity for the production. Similarly, the management of the Fukuyama Hall of Arts and Culture in Hiroshima Prefecture provided commendation for another 2021 Nutcracker production highlighting the program's facilitation of a comprehensive and high-level ballet performance accompanied by a full orchestra. Despite the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, this combination of national level expertise with local production, within the frame of Art Caravan allowed the production to attract a substantial audience, underscoring the effectiveness of Art Caravan in enhancing the cultural offerings of regional theatres.

In fact however, not all initiatives pursued by NBS in collaboration with the Association of Japanese Ballet Companies secured approval from the Art Caravan selection committees. Specifically, the envisioned All Japan Ballet Revival Gala, slated for August 2020, faced insurmountable

challenges primarily attributable to protracted decision-making processes within the administration. The intricate and multifaceted nature of ballet productions rendered the lengthy decision timelines incompatible with the exigencies of ballet production. This example implies a misalignment between administrative funding programs and the practical needs of ballet companies.

Nonetheless, in 2020, the NBS successfully executed the triennial event World Ballet Festival, initiated by its forerunner Arts Staff, despite the challenging circumstances during the state of emergency in August 2021. However, leveraging the unique circumstances that permitted the entry of foreign athletes for the Tokyo Summer Olympics, the NBS successfully navigated through various restrictions, including the closure of Japan's borders. A total of 23 esteemed dancers from prominent foreign ballet companies participated in eight performances held in 2021 between August 13 and 22. NBS persevered, and with adaptation and innovation, organized its triennial gala event. Despite significant economic challenges, NBS ensured continuity and maintained audiences, which were crucial for the continued existence of the Foundation itself (TAKAHASHI 2021).

Conclusion

This article has explored the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the performing arts in Japan, focusing on the years 2020 and 2021, as well as the government's relief measures to support cultural workers. It is worth noting that performances in 2023 have returned to pre-Corona crisis levels. The Tokyo Ballet Company hosted a total of 97 ballet performances, including eleven overseas performances. Additionally, 24 performances featured ballet troupes from abroad, and seven showcased invited opera performances, along with three concerts. According to NBS, their commitment to maintaining performances during the coronavirus pandemic has paid off, allowing them to at least retain part of their core audience. The overall structure of governmental grants and support programs has remained largely unchanged. Throughout the pandemic, the government's policy aimed to offer broad support to individual artists extending financial aid to both professionals and amateur artists. After the COVID-19 period, the Japanese government reverted to supporting professional artists and organizations. Some subsidies that proved effective during the pandemic have been extended with a modified structure.

The Art Caravan program of subsidies to umbrella organizations is one example. The system has transitioned from a handout model to a subsidy-for-deficit financial aid model, and the eligibility criteria for the subsidy has become more stringent. The positive impact of the program, established during the pandemic, is evidenced in part by the fact that NBS currently intends to leverage the subsidy system in collaboration with selected local theatres to establish cultural hubs in various regions. Nevertheless, a persistent challenge remains: the government's support is limited to specific projects and performances that require organizations to submit repeated applications. However, while the annual budget for the Agency of Cultural Affairs for the fiscal years 2020 to 2023 ranged from 106.7 to 106.1 billion yen, the budget for 2024 will be 135 billion yen, reflecting a 27.2 percent increase. Still, the prospect of sustained, dependable, and stable support for cultural production organizations like NBS remains uncertain. The voices of artists' organizations for long-term structural change might not have gotten through to the politicians in charge and might yet fade out as the days of the pandemic recede.

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