

**About the Paris Opera's performance of *At the Hawk's Well* at the Palais Garnier  
by Hiroshi Sugimoto**

It was around one hundred years ago that the Irish poet William Butler Yeats had his first encounter with Noh. The Japanese classical drama made a powerful impression on him. As a mystic, Yeats was fascinated by Celtic myths and legends and he was quick to sense an affinity between the forms of Japanese Noh—a drama of illusion in which the ancient spirits of the dead are summoned onto the stage—and Celtic mysticism.

The poet Ezra Pound introduced Yeats to the first English translations of Noh. Pound himself owed his interest in Noh to Ernest Fenollosa. Originally from the Boston suburbs, Fenollosa came to Japan in the mid-nineteenth century just as it was abandoning its closed-country policy and opening up to the West. Fenollosa made the Japanese aware of the splendor of the culture they were jettisoning in their haste to westernize, and is famous for saving many Japanese cultural assets from destruction. With Noh on the verge of extinction, Fenollosa asked Minoru Umekawa, a Noh master, to teach him about Noh. When Fenollosa died, his widow took his Noh translations to Boston, where she later met Ezra Pound.

It was Noh that inspired Yeats to write *At the Hawk's Well*. Cuchulain, a young Celtic prince, has traveled across the sea to a distant island in search of the water which rises from a well there, because he believes that drinking it will render him immortal. On the island he meets a woman with the spirit of a hawk who is the guardian of the well and an old man who has already been waiting a long time for the water to rise. "I have waited fifty years," the old man tells Cuchulain, "and the water only rose three times in that span. And every time it did, the hawk-woman began to dance, causing me to fall asleep and preventing me from drinking the water." Precisely at that moment the hawk screeches and begins to dance. Cuchulain rushes off in pursuit of the bird and the old man falls asleep again.

*At the Hawk's Well* was first performed as a dance drama in 1916 in front of an aristocratic audience in the drawing room of the London mansion of Lady Cunard of the great shipping family. Soon after World War II, Mario Yokomichi adapted the drama into the Noh format and performed it as *Takahime* ("The Hawk Princess"). The performance at the Paris Opera is thus based on a play which has been adapted as it circled the globe over the last century. This version is a ballet which, together with the Paris Opera's magnificent dancers, attempts to summon Yeats's spirit onto the stage. With the well of immortality located far beyond the boundless sea, it seems unlikely that eternal life will be vouchsafed to our civilization.