

Baritone sings peace, understanding in East Asia

Mennonite Church Canada/Mennonite Mission Network/Hesston College
June 27, 2005
-by Bethany Keener

Nanchong, China and Sapporo, Japan — As the last note hung in the otherwise silent auditorium, listeners sat in still wonder of Anthony Brown's voice, wiping tear-damp eyes. Then, the crowd burst into applause, the sound of their hands ringing into the building's rafters.

Brown, well-versed in opera, oratorio, art song, contemporary works and spirituals, made his Asian debut on a tour May 9 through June 13. Hosted by Mennonite Church Canada Witness partners China Educational Exchange and Mennonite Mission Network, the baritone gave concerts and lectures in China and Japan at universities, concert halls, churches and Mennonite centres.

In each venue, Brown's goal was to connect across race, language and culture to promote peace and help his audiences focus on their oneness in the family of God.

"If I can go to a very different part of the world and connect deeply with others and find in our meeting our common humanity, something very significant has occurred," Brown said. One student told him that their meeting changed her attitude regarding African-Americans. Another student was so touched by the musical message that he approached Brown, hugged him and said, "I love you."

According to Witness worker in Japan, Teresa Sherrill, the message of unity was met with rapt attention. Many commented that Brown's presentations allowed for self-examination, encouraging listeners to look deeper at their own attitudes and see beyond others' exteriors to the Christ inside.

"As Japanese society continues to be confronted by their Asian neighbors for their past and ongoing racial tensions, Tony's words were thought-provoking and led us to consider the power and presence of the transcendent one," Sherrill said.

In Japan's busy and competitive society, spirituality is valued but many feel they cannot do more than visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples for traditional rites of passage. Sherrill said current trends in Japan have brought "a relativism and freedom that was not tolerated or encouraged in the past. Allegiance to the group identity has been diluted and more people are expressing their own preferences."

For Mitsuko Yaguchi, a Mennonite, Brown's performances were a segue into inviting non-believers to a church function. Yaguchi-san brought nine non-Christian friends to Brown's concert. All were impressed with the baritone's beautiful voice and left with detailed program notes outlining the meaning and background of each song.



Anthony Brown (right) greets members of Nanchong (China) Christian Church following Sunday morning worship. Translating for him (far left) is Li Na, a senior at China West Normal University.

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Todd Hanson, Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker with CEE has an English teaching ministry at China West Normal University, in Nanchong. Hanson reported an overwhelming response to Brown's presence in the university classroom and in concert. One music professor expressed gratitude for the baritone's willingness to learn from the Chinese. Audience members were delighted to join Brown in singing several African-American spirituals, as well as a Chinese folk tune the singer learned on the road. He also visited the Nanchong Church, leading a Saturday afternoon choir workshop, singing in the Sunday morning worship service, and then visiting with Chinese Christians.

Gordon Janzen, who oversees Witness ministries in Asia, says that the Anthony Brown tour illustrates the benefits of working with partner agencies. "Through our partners at Mission Network and CEE, our ministries are enriched by a multiplicity of connections. . In this case, Tony Brown, through Hesston College, was able to minister to people of another culture in another continent. The world of international ministry would be so much smaller without these networks," said Janzen.

Brown said the tour helped him understand and feel solidarity with the Chinese and Japanese. "My family has been increased and I thank God for the opportunity to share my life and to receive the gift of new brothers and sisters. Hearing their stories only confirmed for me just how much we are alike and just how much we need each other."

As artist-in-residence at Hesston (Kan.) College, Brown provides vocal coaching to music students when needed and teaches African-American History, The Helping Relationship and Introduction to Social Welfare courses. He has toured extensively in North America and Europe and keeps an active singing schedule.