

Nikkei shinbun 2010-17/5 (mon)

“The mysterious sound - lingering in Scandinavia”,(art.: Rio Yamase)

Covered in mother-of-pearl workmanship and arabesque ornamentation, this violin is a beautiful piece of handiwork. The instrument descends from the Hardanger area in the west of Norway. While played the resonance is long and deep with a touch of melancholy attached to the sound. One might say that listening to the tones of the violin brings forth images like the shimmering northern lights profiled against the night sky.

8 years has passed since I started playing this instrument that even influenced the Norwegian composer Edward Grieg. In Japan I am the only professional performer. Grieg got ideas to his music from the old Hardanger Violin, which had 8 or 9 strings. When I read his biography 11 years ago, this particular word, “Harding Fiddle” (or the more easy to understand) “Hardanger Violin”, got my attention: “How did it really sound?” This was something I was determined to find out.

“The long lingering sound and the beautiful costumes”

I became interested in Norway more than 20 years ago. Because I was so fortunate to have a piano-playing sister that married a Norwegian, I got the opportunity to perform Scandinavian music with her. At the same time I was deeply absorbed in studying about Norwegian composers. It was around that time I got knowledge about the Hardanger Violin. When I got hold of a CD and listened to it I realized that the tuning was different from the violin and the resonance was considerably longer. This was a very strange timbre and tone quality. I went around to different music stores in Oslo in an attempt to actually be able to try to play the real thing, but the Hardanger Violin was not displayed in any of them. In fact the storeowners told me “we’re better off not dealing with folk music”. There seemed to be a fixed perception among them that the instrument was out of date or something. Eventually, I got hold of the real thing 3 years later. It happened at an event at the Norwegian embassy in Tokyo. Decorated with a dragonhead it has a beautiful design. And it has more than 2 times the strings of a violin. Even if only one person is playing it, it sounds like 2 or 3 players playing together.

At that time I got lessons and advice from the famous Hardanger Violin player Hallvard Kvåle, that was visiting Japan at the time. One might say that this opened some doors for me.

In the news: “A Japanese is studying”.

When learning to master the Hardanger Violin you do not use a score. I travelled many times to Hallvard Kvåle and learned directly from him, by ear. Hardanger is a beautiful region dense with apple trees and crystal clear rivers and having a Japanese coming there to study was something really out of the ordinary. When I participated for a month in a seminar I also got in the local paper headlines—“Rio Yamase from Japan is studying Norwegian folk music”—that stirred up quite a fuzz in the local community. The next day, whether I was walking down the street or doing shopping, I could feel the stare of the locals. In Norway, reserved people are common. They don’t stare in a direct manner but rather glance carefully while speaking in a tiny voice: “Good luck, hang in there”. In

a modest way very kind people encouraged me.

When I actually started playing the instrument I understood the reason why there was no score attached to the music. The different turns and ornamentation in the playing technique were so detailed, and the rhythm varied from triple measure to fifth measure. Therefore the complicated nuances are very difficult to take down into writing.

Opinion is divided on the matter regarding the origin of the Hardanger Violin. The oldest existing violin was built in 1651, but there are reasons to believe that it existed even before 1600. It seems to have been used in wedding ceremonies as an accompaniment to folk dance.

Concept melodically derived from “Morning Mood”.

In “Morning Mood”, a part of the Peer Gynt suite made by Grieg, who eagerly gathered folk songs, the song begins with a melody similar to playing on the sympathetic strings on the Hardanger Violin. “The white nights of summer” As a regular visitor to the region, Grieg got to hear this melody while drinking together with fellow musicians. They would continue the party till the break of dawn, and when drowsing in the morning sun Grieg would come to hear the tuning of the fiddle. And as the saying goes, when hearing these intervals “Morning Mood”, a melody being able to express the chilly morning air of Scandinavia, was born.

While continuing with my frequent trips to Norway I also started to introduce the violin in Japan and released an album containing original material. The famous animation director, Hayao Miyazaki, discovered this CD and in 2006 I was appointed to write and perform the music of the short-animation movie “Mon-Mon the water spider”. The same year I also performed with the Hardanger Violin on the animation film “Tales from Earthsea” by Goro Miyazaki. It is a blessing if I can be able to continue with such promotional activities like this.

Desember last year I started the “Hardanger Club”. I also do teaching, but with an instrument with an average prize of 11 000 dollars I also have a rental service. For the time being I have 12 students out of which 5 of them have already started performing on their own. Through the Hardanger Violin I want to promote Norwegian culture in a large scale.