

String Magazine, June 2010: Yamase Rio Interview

“It all started out with this insignificant word...”

We asked Japans leading Hardanger violin player, Yamase Rio, some questions about her encounter with the Hardanger violin, and what she would like to achieve as the director of the Japan-Hardanger Club.

“Attracted to the Hardanger Violin”

I: How long has it been since you started playing the Hardanger Violin?

RY: I actually started playing the violin back in 2003, but when I first encountered the instrument was way before that.

I: After graduating from Toho Gakuen Scool of Music, my sister and I was the first Japanese people to perform at the Munch museum. Since then I was completely attracted to Norwegian culture. I began to think, “I have to study Scandinavian culture and music much, much more”, and when I once again picked up an old biography about Grieg I came over the a sentence with the word “Hardanger Violin”. It felt like I had arrived there for a purpose.

In Norway I was told that the “Harding Fele” was a small instrument with 4 or 5 sympathetic strings, but since there were no photograph attached to this explanation I got really interested in what kind of instrument they were talking about. I had a strong desire wanting to search for, and listen to, the instrument, but thinking about it know, I really don’t know why I had those thoughts. Mysterious, it all started out from this simple word.

But even if I wanted to play the instrument, I didn’t have it myself. When I asked my Norwegian brother in law, he knew about the instrument, but where to go to listen to it played or where it was sold, he did not know. I was really surprised that even the locals did not know this.

But my brother-in-law gave me a CD with the Hardanger Violin, and this was the first time I actually heard it. It resembles the Violin, but the tuning is different. I really felt that something was different and really wanted to know more about it, but I didn’t have a single picture, or the imagination to visualize it.

At that time a discovered a souvenir of a miniature model Hardanger Violin, and after that I got a somewhat understanding of its shape and figure. And even in my own performances I started changing the tuning of my violin to that of a Hardanger Violin. I thought that when performing folk music, which is the base of Classical music, it would be a good idea to make the performance as close to the original. Therefore, before getting hold of the real thing, my feelings towards this instrument ran high. I wanted to encounter it, but I couldn’t. I was stuck with this kind of unrequited love for a while.

I: It is quite rare that an encounter with an instrument is this hard.

RY: That is true. Before I was finally being able to hold it 3 more years had passed. In Oslo there are only 2 or 3 music stores carrying string instruments, and I went to them and inquired about the instrument. Of course they knew about the instrument, but they

told me “if you play classical violin there is know reason to play the Hardanger Violin”. That came as a complete shock to me.

But this instrument also heavily influenced Grieg. In Norway, people with, but also without, this knowledge is present. A little while ago, the Hardanger Violin was considered an old instrument played by old people soon to be forgotten, but at the time when I started searching for the instrument a revival movement of young players were on the rise. Nowadays, on the contrary, it has become a boom all over.

I: Did Rio Yamase help to fire up this boom?

RY: There is a possibility for that. As a fact, when I started to spread the Hardanger Violin in Japan, the Norwegian mass media fronted this and got everybody’s attention.

The Norwegian National Broadcasting, NRK, also came to Japan and made a broadcasting from my classes. They were really surprised because my students also played very well. I was also covered several times by one of the largest newspapers in Norway, Aftenposten. It really got a lot of attention.

With only this insignificant word as a beginning, through hard work and sincere intentions I have gradually come to spread this fascinating instrument to people. When I think about all the efforts that have come to bear fruit up till today, I am filled with gratitude towards the Norwegian locals who has backed me up and all the people that support my work in Japan.

I: Except from the Norwegians, is it so that there are no other players around?

RY: Well, in Asia everybody speaks of Rio Yamase as the player. In America it also has quite a market share, particularly because there are a lot of Norwegian immigrants there, and among that group there are a lot of players.

The 2nd and 3rd of May I was invited to the Hardanger Folk Festival were I performed. With a festival displaying the likes of local superstar Knut Buen and such, I participated as a foreign guest. Except from playing local folk songs I performed my own original compositions from “Mon-Mon the water spider”. This is a short-animation by the famous Studio Ghibli producer Hayao Miazaki. I also performed a tune from “Tales from Earthsea” and a set closing in on more classical repertoire, such as Halling, taken from Griegs Peer Gynt, Amazing Graze and Country Road. When I perform Country Road everybody is surprised. Well actually, it seem that they get quite shocked: “What, can you play this tune on the Hardanger Violin”. But when I finish everybody is quite excited: “I didn’t know this type of playing on the Hardanger Violin was possible”. Finally, being Japanese, I also performed “Sakura Sakura”, and everybody sat spellbound listening in awe.

The “Harding Folk” festival is a festival held in the Hardanger region. This was the first time, but it was a magnificent festival well worth being commemorated.

I: How is the Norwegian springtime? Comfortable?

RY: May in Norway is a marvelous season. It is the time of year when the apple trees are in full bloom, it resembles the Japanese cherry blossom. This type of beautiful

scenery can be seen; on top of the mountains there are glaciers, on the foot of the mountain apple trees blooming.

The specialties of the area are apples and cherries. Because it is an inland region the climate is rather mild, and although it snows in wintertime it doesn't pile up. I think this type of mild climate stimulated the culture as well. Grieg also came many times to this region and created many of his famous songs here. Here, they produce the wine that Grieg was so fond of, and his old working cabin still remains intact. Today, it is possible to see this cabin on the facilities of Ullensvang hotel, which was established by Grieg's old friends, the Utne family.

Hardanger Violin and Culture

I: Things concerning the Hardanger Violin, are they also connected with the culture in the Hardanger region.

RY: That is right. Culture is not a short time phenomenon since you always have the importance of tradition. The first 2 or 3 years when I started playing the instrument in Japan there were no people, like today, that could reach out a helping hand. This way, if you don't work and scrape in sincere efforts over a long period of time the seeds won't bear fruit. Therefore, thanks to everybody in Japan that have given his or her attention. Because the name Hardanger is not very well known, I think it is very special that it has been taken in this much already in Japan.

From now on I am expanding into cultural exchange on a large scale, but to do that time is necessary. I think Norway and Japan has good potential for cultural exchange since there are so many similarities in the people's characters.

The counterpart to the Japanese kimono, the Norwegian folk costume bunad, has embroidery sown carefully stitch by stitch. This embroidery is also very popular in Japan. The Norwegian Christmas food is also very similar to the Japanese new years food.

Usually, when thinking about Scandinavia it brings forth the image of "nature" rather than "culture", but in Japan Scandinavian design and furniture is also very popular. These are also important factors in the Hardanger folk culture.

Together with musical activities, the re-appreciation of culture and the creation of a new history is very important, and this is where my heart is.

From the start I have wanted to share with everybody the fascination I have for this instrument (*laughs*). Therefore I wanted to make a corporation out of the business that I, up till now, had been doing singlehandedly. This way, with more than one "output" the influence would become stronger and it would be possible to make an even bigger impact.

Even though it all started with this insignificant word, the sum of all these encounters is that I have changed in more ways than one. Not only with through the close friendship that I have established with Norwegian culture, but even more important, my life as I knew it in Japan, has changed completely, and Japan has become a brand new world.

When talking about classical music, I have investigated Grieg's music thoroughly, and this way I found out where many modern composers like Ravel and Debussy, but also different genres like Irish music and American country have their roots. They all seem to have been influenced by Norwegian music.

My discoveries and obtained knowledge in different areas about Norwegian culture is something I want to share, and here is where the connection to the "Japan-Hardanger Club comes to play.

It all started with my older sister marrying a Norwegian, me, I got married to Scandinavian culture (*laughs*).

"From next year you can get a scholarship"

I: I can't help thinking that the violin seems a bit more inaccessible, or difficult.

RY: Yes, but the Hardanger Violin is much more expensive than the mass produced violin. That is because in the Hardanger region only 4 instrument makers remain. In one year. One of them can only manage to make about 2 violins, that is to say 8 violins per year all together. One can also use old fiddles and repair them. It has even come so far that even in the Hardanger region it is hard to get hold of a good instrument. Because the complete number of Hardanger Violins is low, the marked value adjusts to this. As for me, I think it would be best if it were easy to get hold of in Japan. In the end I feel it will be necessary to start making the violin in Japan. Then we could reach more people. But for now we will have to settle with the Violin that is made in Norway. We have 5 instruments for rent at the Hardanger Club. They are possible to use at the lessons we have at the club or if you simply just want to try it. We also help with repairs and other necessities for those who already have purchased an instrument. And for those who want to buy, I carefully handpick the instruments, and they have been given a custom design to meet the needs of Japanese people.

Now we have outstanding students that perform at different Scandinavian events. The Hardanger Club can also introduce students to such places.

One of the strengths of the Hardanger Club is being an agency cultivating people with special talent or skills. From next year, since we are doing cultural exchange we plan to offer a scholarship. We want to let 2 people who are highly motivated go to Norway as exchange students. In the future we intend to cover both music and dance with this scholarship, but for now we want to focus on the Hardanger Violin, since there are so many new players in Japan already.

The tour we have from the 19th~26th of August, is intended as a motivation tour. Of course it is important to practice and work hard here in Japan, but it is also very important to go the original location, feel the atmosphere and perform there. The "Japan-Hardanger cultural exchange festival" which is being held on the 21st of August is not a festival only for Hardanger Violin, but a very special musical festival. Here it is possible to combine travel with performance in front of a broad European audience, and that should be highly motivating as well. The students also get to expand their network, and from these encounters new seeds are sowed. And that is actually just the same way I got started.

“I want to cultivate the next generation”

I: I think that by creating this organization you have developed, bringing individual activities one step further...

RY:I wanted to start this organization a long time ago, but thanks to the support from different locals in Hardanger it became a reality. We have come this far by working hard, but by our joint effort I want to make it even bigger.

And then, since there is no textbook with a method for learning the Hardanger fiddle, this year I intend to develop this and put it into writing.

I think that when my students can assist me as teachers, then I will not be completely alone about this, and it will be possible to expand more rapidly.

In the Hardanger Club people with the same interests get to meet, and from these encounters new things are born. The Hardanger Club has become my life work, and at the same time I want to cultivate the next generation.