



## Profile

### AGATSUMA, Hiromitsu

Born in 1973, he is the trailblazer of the generation following Shin'ichi Kinoshita. He started practicing the Tsugaru shamisen from when he was six, and in 1995 and 1996 he won the championship in a national conference for Tsugaru shamisen. With his outstanding technique, he plays original pieces mixing Japanese classics, jazz and rock in his live performances. AGATSUMA has performed in many sessions with musicians of other genres both in Japan and other countries. In 2003, he also made a successful tour on the East Coast of the United States with his own band. His physical appearance also appeals to the younger generation — he has a trendy brown hairstyle, pierced ears and wears a leather jacket.  
<http://www.agatsuma.tv/>

"EU-Japan Year of People-to-People Exchanges" Hiromitsu Agatsuma Band - Tsugaru shamisen performance (events planned by the Japan Foundation)

Jan. 12: L'Auditori, Barcelona

Jan. 14: Centro Cultural Olga Cadaval, Lisbon

Jan. 16: SALLE ZINO FRANCESCATTI (Conservatoire Annexe), Marseille

Jan. 19: Conservatoire de Musique Auditorium, Luxembourg

Jan. 21: Auditorium du Passage 44, Brussels

# Artist Interview

アーティストインタビュー

2005.1.19



A shamisen player from the rock generation, Hiromitsu Agatsuma talks about taking his shamisen music to Europe.

## ロック世代の津軽三味線奏者 ヨーロッパ公演に臨む上妻宏光に聞く

The shamisen is one of the traditional Japanese string instruments that has given birth to several music genres. Among the different types of shamisen, the "Tsugaru shamisen" is one with a larger body (as a sound box) and a thicker neck and strings that evolved among local performers of the Tsugaru region of Aomori prefecture at the northernmost end of Japan's main island, Honshu. It was originally used as an instrument to accompany folk songs and it wasn't until about a half century ago that it came to be played as a solo instrument for stage performance. The appeal of Tsugaru shamisen performances comes from the technique and skill of the performer in working variations on a theme much like jazz performance. For this reason it has found an audience among the generation raised on rock music. Young performers today are introducing elements of Western music in their search for contemporary expression in their shamisen music, and Hiromitsu Agatsuma is one of the leaders of this movement today. (Interviewed in Dec.10, 2004 by Kazumi Narabe)

### At what age did you begin the shamisen?

I was six. My father studied shamisen. Although ours was not a family of performers handing down their art from generation to generation as is common in Japan's traditional arts, growing up listening to my father play from childhood had a big effect on me. Since the Tsugaru shamisen is one where you really strike the strings, there is a strong sense of rhythm and speed to the music. I was very much attracted to that sound.

### Wasn't it quite rare for an elementary school student to be learning shamisen in your generation?

Yes, it was. I never told my friends that I was learning it. There is a strong image of the shamisen as an instrument older people play. Since there were no other children around me who were learning it, I was a bit embarrassed about it. During the weekdays I would be practicing whenever I had the time, so I didn't play much with children my own age. Then, when I was about 10, I was on a TV show for talented young children because I played the shamisen. That is when my friends found out about it and they all said it was cool.

### When did you decide to become a professional performer?

When I was 14. That was the year I won a national competition for Tsugaru shamisen players. For the first time, I felt that maybe I had some talent for the shamisen after all. At that time it was really only a case of my being good for a 14-year-old, but it made me want to take on the challenge of making it in the world of adult performers. Where I lived at that time in Ibaraki prefecture, there weren't many really good performers. The top performers were mostly centered in Tokyo. I thought that would be the place where I could hear the best shamisen music and also build connections in the music world. So, I moved to Tokyo after graduating from middle school.

Did you study under a teacher then?

I studied by myself. The most common path is to enter an organization under some teacher, but when you enter such a group most of your time is taken up with the group activities. I wanted to become a professional performer, so I knew I had to practice performing and learn a lot of pieces. There was so much I needed to learn, so I knew I didn't have time for group activities. The kind of a system where a lot of people aren't necessarily skilled as performers are able to get along just on the strength of the organization didn't agree with me. There were some other performers at the time who never joined an organization, and there were a lot who were expelled from their organizations, too. These were people who were expelled because they wanted to try different kinds of music activities from those of their teachers. I joined a rock band, for instance, and that would have caused a problem if I were affiliated with some teacher. In order to improve my technique and expand my musical expression, working alone was easier for me.

The Japanese traditional music world is one where most of the performance opportunities come from your affiliation with an established teacher. Didn't that decision to go it alone make it difficult for you?

I would follow along with older friends who were performers and I played in the folk music bars in Tokyo's Asakusa area and gradually got jobs through word-of-mouth. Also, I didn't want people saying that I was playing in a rock band because I couldn't play the traditional shamisen repertoire, so every year I entered the All-Japan Tsugaru Shamisen Competition held in the city of Hirosaki in Aomori prefecture. Because this isn't always a world where you can win strictly on the basis of your own talent, I was determined to beat the students of the top teachers. You have to be really good to win a competition like that, so I practiced hard. With Tsugaru shamisen every teacher teaches a slightly different style of playing, so there are a number of "schools" of performance. I would study the music scores of the different schools. I collected cassette tapes and SP records in order to learn the phrasing of the masters who are recognized as the roots of the different schools of Tsugaru shamisen performance. I thought that I could win recognition if I won the All-Japan Tsugaru Shamisen Competition just once. I ended up winning it in 1995 and '96.

## Artist Interview

A shamisen player from the rock generation, Hiromitsu Agatsuma talks about taking his shamisen music to Europe.

ロック世代の津軽三味線奏者 ヨーロッパ公演に臨む上妻宏光に聞く



That is something that certainly required a lot of will power.

I'm glad now that I had set my sights high. When people told me that the Tsugaru shamisen could really be played only by people who grew up in Tsugaru, that just inspired me to try that much harder. I'm pretty sure I'm going to be playing Tsugaru shamisen for the rest of my life, and until I die people may be telling me that my music is Ibaraki shamisen, not Tsugaru shamisen. But I'll never let anyone say that they love the Tsugaru shamisen and its spirit more than me. I believe that Tsugaru shamisen should not be limited to the category of Tsugaru folk song accompaniment. I believe anything I do as a Japanese performer to express music, in the universal sense of the word, on this instrument, as one of the many types of musical instruments in the world, is all valid.

Today it has become quite common for rock to be performed on the shamisen or for shamisen players to work with musicians from other genre, but at the time you first started playing rock it must have brought some criticism, didn't it?

People objected strongly, saying it wasn't shamisen. And very few people came to our rock band's live performances. There was a preconception that a shamisen player had to be wearing a kimono and the sound had to be a particular type. Anything that didn't fit with those preconceptions would be criticized. It is only in the last four or five years that things have changed. Before that, there were certainly attempts by some to use the shamisen for new types of musical expression, but most of it was little more than adding drums to play the kind of beat that already existed in the background of traditional pieces like the "Tsugaru Jongara-bushi." They weren't on the level of true ensemble performance. When I was in elementary school, I used to listen to rock, blues and Euro beat music on the late-night radio programs and I thought that it would be possible to put shamisen to that music. When I was 17, I was lucky to be invited to play with a rock band and I found that in fact you could play rock with a shamisen. Every live performance was an experiment for me at that time. Of course, shamisen had not been a part of rock from its inception, so there were some parts of the tonal quality and phrasing of traditional Japanese folk music that did not fit with rock. I was working to find my own style by seeking good balance within the band's music and discovering the expanding musical possibilities that would result even by changing just one sound.

Was this the result of a shift on your part away from traditional shamisen music toward new musical activities?

Since traditional music is something that has been built up over such a long time, there are surely some forms within it that can't be broken down. And there are some that we don't need to break down. On the other hand, the process of breaking down old forms to create new ones is necessary to keep our music from becoming something that no longer fits the sensitivities of people living today. If you concentrate only on protecting the old forms, the audience who listen to your music is going to get smaller and smaller. My desire to study the traditional repertoire is still strong, but my desire to create music that the young generation can accept and feel an affinity to is even stronger. In any era, people who try to do something different have to accept the fact that they will face strong criticism. But, once someone sets a new precedent it is easier for others to follow. I feel that I must be one to set such a precedent.

Did your desire to perform overseas come after you began doing rock?

I thought I would like to study in the U.S. after I graduated from high school.

## Artist Interview

A shamisen player from the rock generation, Hironitsu Agatsuma talks about taking his shamisen music to Europe.

ロック世代の津軽三味線奏者 ヨーロッパ公演に臨む上妻宏光に聞く

American music was the first foreign music I listened to when I was young, and Japanese pop music has been strongly influenced by the West. I wanted to experience a country, people and an environment where original music was being created. I wanted to see what kind of an effect it would have on me and how the shamisen I play might change. In the end, I never made that first trip, though, because by the time I turned 18 I had already begun a full-fledged professional career as a performer. But, I still kept the dream of performing my own concerts abroad, and since 1990 I have been performing overseas once or twice a year. I have also gone to places like Hong Kong and Central and South America to perform as part of a Japanese folk music unit or in a rock band. And, wherever I have gone people have been very interested because they have never seen or heard an instrument like the shamisen before. And the responses after those concerts have always been good. I think what people overseas find interesting is that despite being a string instrument, the sound of the shamisen also has a strong percussion aspect. It is certainly an instrument with a uniquely Japanese sound.

## Artist Interview

A shamisen player from the rock generation, Hiromitsu Agatsuma talks about taking his shamisen music to Europe.

ロック世代の津軽三味線奏者 ヨーロッパ公演に臨む上妻宏光に聞く



Has the response to your performances overseas affected your playing style any?

Once I had a chance to do an impromptu performance at a New York jazz club. No one in the audience knew anything about me, and my shamisen was the first one they had ever seen. I didn't know whether I would be booed or applauded, so I thought it was a great chance to see what I could do. At first the audience was surprised by the look and the sound of the instrument. And then they were surprised to see that I could jump right in and play a session with the jazz musicians there. It turned out to be a great learning experience for me, where I could feel the real potential of the shamisen. But, you can only get by on the fact that your sound is different for the first couple of years. If it is only a matter of being able to play jazz on a shamisen, then it is no different than if you were doing it with a guitar. In the end it is no good just to adapt your sound to the foreign music. What I feel a need for is original music that is based on unique Japanese sound. So, I want to be able to create music based on everything I experience while performing, while watching what parts of the music the audience is reacting to and what they are feeling while they listen. I want to be able to reach the audience with that kind of music. That is why it is important for me to perform my own original music overseas, before audiences that have no preconceptions about shamisen music.

Did you choose "Tradition, Innovation and Transmission in the Tsugaru shamisen" as the title of your 2005 concert tour based on what you have learned about the originality of Japanese music in your overseas concerts?

The more I go abroad the more I think about my roots. On my first four albums I composed mainly using jazz, fusion or rock rhythms, but on the fifth album now being released I use the rhythms and flavor of Japanese folk music with strictly acoustic instrument sound. I think we are in an era when we should be bringing out our Japanese DNA. No matter how skillfully you try to bring in foreign elements in culture or in music, you are never going to be as good as the original as long as you are imitating. As Japanese, we have things like the unique Japanese sense of rhythm we call "ma" (inserted pause) and certain concern for minute detail and unseen depth in Japanese culture that people in other countries don't have as an innate, ingrained sensibility. I believe that if we can accept anew some of the aspects of Japanese culture that we have considered outdated and embarrassing until now, if we can digest it and bring it to life again in a contemporary context, then we will surely be able to create things that only we Japanese can create. I want to express things that are being forgotten as the Internet and email make the world increasingly small, things like our sense of the seasons. From now on I want to make sound that is very human, sound with human warmth. My tour in Europe in 2005 will be the first overseas presentation of this new sound I am working on. I believe that Europeans are open to traditional things. I am undertaking a new challenge to see how European audiences respond to an unfamiliar type of new sound centering mainly around the shamisen, Japanese taiko drums and piano.

It sounds as if your music will continue to evolve in new directions in your 30s.

I intend to keep exploring this new sound for the next three or four years. But, in five or six years you may find me getting into electronic music. The shamisen will always be my instrument, though. I can't express it well in words, but it's like my body resonates with the sound of the shamisen. It is like my body and the shamisen have the same wavelengths. Its sound tells me honestly when there is something unusual in my body condition, or when I haven't been practicing enough. No matter how much I play, I never get tired of it. The scale in traditional

## Artist Interview

A shamisen player from the rock generation, Hiromitsu Agatsuma talks about taking his shamisen music to Europe.

ロック世代の津軽三味線奏者 ヨーロッパ公演に臨む上妻宏光に聞く

Japanese music is basically a five-note scale. Compared to a 12-note scale, that means there are seven notes we are not using, and that gives you a lot of leeway. For example, if you add two notes you can get a Spanish type sound. When you play with different people new types of phrasing are born. There are lots of things I can do and want to try in order to expand the possibilities of the shamisen, like changing the tuning and developing new playing techniques and developing the instrument itself. I plan to try all these possibilities I am thinking about by the time I reach the age of 50.