



Profile

Shuichi Hidano

Born in 1969, Hidano began percussion at the age of 10. His first encounter with traditional Japanese wadaiko drums was at the age of 18 and he trained with a wadaiko group *Kodo*. He began solo performance activities in 1989 and since then has given a total of over 1,300 performances in Japan and 16 foreign countries. He also performs often with jazz, rock and ethnic music groups and musicians. In 2005 he served as producer for government supported events at the Aichi Expo 2005. He has also worked on the development of wadaiko drums under an advisory contract with the U.S. percussion maker Remo.

<http://www.hidashu.com/>



Artist Interview

アーティストインタビュー

A fusion of Japanese drumming and Western music The world of Shuichi Hidano

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和太鼓と西洋音楽の融合
ヒダノ修一の世界

Drum performance using the traditional Japanese drums known as wadaiko is winning an international audience and overseas performance groups are even being formed in places like Europe and North America. Traditionally, the Japanese drums were not played as solo performance instruments. The drums were traditionally used only as accompaniment for prayer incantation at temples and shrines, or as percussion instruments in the ensembles that played for ceremonies or festival rites and the music for stage performances. It wasn't until after World War II that these Japanese drums came to be played for the general public's entertainment in the form of drum ensembles or in solo drum performance. Today, there are countless wadaiko performance groups, both amateur and professional, but there are extremely few professional wadaiko drum soloists. Among this rare breed, Shuichi Hidano is a popular solo performer who sometimes explores the possibilities of applying the methodologies of Western music to the Japanese drum tradition as he creates his own unique world of sound. At the same time he also works as a producer. (Interview by Kazumi Narabe)

It has been 15 years now since you began solo performance and we understand that you are commemorating this with a nationwide tour.

I planned this tour as a way to sort of "reset" myself and to reconstruct my ideas about what kind of music I should pursue from now on. For each of the performances on this tour, I am taking into consideration the culture of each locality and the characteristics of the venue when deciding the pieces I will perform and their order. I wanted to make each of the performances on this tour different, so I planned 30 different programs. I always disliked the expression "drummer" (*taiko-uchi*) and I have referred to myself as a musician instead. A lot of my performances are collaborations with traditional folk musicians or jazz musicians and I think I have been looked upon as someone who has strayed from the traditional wadaiko world to try strange new things. But now, as I am doing this tour where I really get into the thick grit of my drum world, I feel that I have finally become a taiko-uchi for the first time. In the audiences at my performances are people who have come to hear me play rather than some other of the many musicians around. I came to the wadaiko from a different world and have continued to pursue originality in my work. So it is very encouraging for me that there are people like this who have come to recognize and appreciate my work.

You say that you came to wadaiko from another world. How exactly did you first come to it?

My parents loved classical music and I grew up in an environment where there was always music playing. I liked instruments that play the melody in music and when I joined the music club in elementary school I wanted to play either the recorder or the keyboard harmonica. But, so did most of the other kids, too. So, we had to

Artist Interview

A fusion of Japanese drumming and
Western music

The world of Shuichi Hidano

和太鼓と西洋音楽の融合
ヒダノ修一の世界

decide by paper-scissors-stone who would do the other instruments. I ended up losing and getting assigned to play the one instrument no one else wanted to play, the bongos. The bongos are known as the most painful percussion instrument of all, because in essence you are hitting the drum with the bones of your fingers. That was my first painful experience with percussion (laughs). In junior high school I wanted to play the trumpet in the wind instrument band, but there were already too many in the trumpet section. The only openings were for the tuba and percussion. So, I felt a sinking feeling when they asked what I had played in elementary school (laughs). I was told, "Since you are big, percussion seems perfect for you." So there I was in percussion again. My life has been decided by my inability to escape the percussion section (laughs).

It looks like percussion chose you (laughs). At what point did you begin to think you might like to be a performer?

I happened to start thinking about it in junior high. It was there that I learned about drums and started a band with some friends. In high school I discovered jazz and started playing drums and singing as the vocalist in a band. That happened to be at a time when an amateur band boom was just getting under way and everyone was working hard to get good at music. I encountered a lot of types of music at that time and worked to absorb as much as I could. I finally decided to try to become a performer when my parents asked me if I was interested in trying to get into a music college.

In order to get into a Japanese music college, you have to have specialized training in something like voice or piano, don't you ...

From my second year in high school I was getting out early to take private lessons in voice and percussion. I was told by the percussionist, Mr. Makoto Aruga, that I should study voice before I come to study under him. This is because he says that, "breath is the basis of all music." Breathing in, breathing out, delivering the voice from deep in the stomach. This is the foundation to start all music study with. Different people have different breath lengths, and that is why people make music differently. If the breathing isn't right the music will not have a pleasing sound. I learned how important the breath control acquired through voice training is in music. Wishing to know traditional Japanese music, I studied the *naga-uta* percussion from the age of 21 to 25. And, traditional Japanese music is no exception to the rule; the true master has complete control of his breathing.

How did you study the technique of percussion instrument performance?

I am one who moves the hands very quickly when performing, and this basic music training came from my study of classical music percussion. I first actually studied percussion under Mr. Aruga. And in my first lesson he suddenly started to strangle me with tremendous force in his hands. I instinctively pulled his hands off and pushed him back so hard that he fell over. He said to me, "That's good. You looked like that you were so tense that you wouldn't hear anything I was teaching you. I want you to come to each lesson with the feeling you had just now when you pushed me over." And that was the end of that day's lesson (laughs). He is the kind of teacher who will give you ten answers for every one question you ask and then say, "You choose." I had been told by an upper classman that I may not always understand what Mr. Aruga is saying at the time, but I should write it down in a notebook because someday it will be useful. So, in the train on the way home from those esoteric lessons, I would try to remember everything he had said and write it down in my notebook. He was a tough teacher for a kid like me who had been into

Artist Interview

A fusion of Japanese drumming and
Western music
The world of Shuichi Hidano
和太鼓と西洋音楽の融合
ヒダノ修一の世界

rock since the age of 17, but I believe now that he taught me the attitude to approach music with. What I remember best of the things he taught me was these words: “Because it is a percussion instrument, you must sing. It can be anything you want, but always have some melody in your head that you are singing. No matter what the situation, never let yourself just follow along on the score.” The ideals I am following now, like “follow your own mind and don’t let yourself be guided by the opinions of others,” or “whether you are a major or minor performer is something that time will decide,” or “do the kind of music that you can die feeling satisfied with,” these are all things that I learned back then with Mr. Aruga. After that, I studied percussion under Mr. Tomoyuki Okada. I feel very fortunate to have studied under such great teachers. Both Mr. Aruga and Mr. Okada were people who laid the foundations of Japanese percussion while doing very avant-garde things that just came naturally for them. Most of the things that we think of as new today are things that they were already doing in their day.

Was it at that time that you first encountered the Japanese wadaiko?

I failed in my first attempt to get into music college, so I went to a wadaiko group *Kodo* with an introduction from Mr. Okada. *Kodo* is an internationally famous wadaiko group based on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture, and I went to see one of their performances. The first time I heard five or six of the drummers hit their big drums with one mighty boom in unison, it erased everything from this head of mind that had been so immersed in music that I could see the notes of the sheet music in my mind’s eye every time I heard a line of music. Everything went white. Hearing that fresh sound, produced by the dynamic body movements of the performers, I felt something like the sound was a clump rushing at me. At that moment I felt that this was an instrument that I could take out onto the world stage with confidence. After that performance, I was backstage literally grabbing the performers and begging them to let me join the group. But, the communal life they lead didn’t fit my nature and I only stayed there for less than a year. I was able to make the physical change from a body that plays percussion to a body (musculature) to strike the big wadaiko drums, and I was able to learn the spirit needed to approach the wadaiko drums, but I wasn’t able to leave behind the Western music I had known since childhood. And, I also felt that there was more to the inspiration I had first received from the wadaiko than what was actually being played on stage. So, I ended up leaving the group before I ever performed with them on stage.

That must have been the beginning of a period of searching for you.

I went around to live performance houses and jazz clubs and got gigs. People in the traditional Japanese music arts that don’t use Western musical notation aren’t expected to be able to read a music score. But when they saw that I could take a jazz score and play drum from it right away, they were happy to take me in. By the way, when I compose music it is always on a Western style music score. So, I was able to jump in and do jam sessions with musicians from a number of different genres. This was also the time when I met the Noh flutist Yukihiko Issa and the Tsugaru shamisen artist Shin’ichi Kinoshita. They were people like me who wanted to use the traditional instruments to do something contemporary and we did some interesting things together. If one of them said they wanted a “shaaa” sound, I would put a cymbal next to my wadaiko, and at another time I might add a cowbell. And, as long as I’m adding those, why not add a couple more different wadaiko to the set? That is how I arrived at my wadaiko drum set. I could play the

Artist Interview

A fusion of Japanese drumming and Western music

The world of Shuichi Hidano

和太鼓と西洋音楽の融合

ヒダノ修一の世界



drums, I could play the wadaiko and I could play the (handheld) tsuzumi drum. So, I was busy every day, playing in about 15 different bands in all. But, when I was 24 I developed a chronic inflammation in my left hand and I had to take off a half a year to recover. Then, when I returned I found that there was no place for me anymore in those bands. I realized that I had only been an expendable quantity to be made use of.

That gave you a chance to re-think your situation?

I began to question whether it was really a good thing to be able to do all kinds of performance. I asked myself which instrument it was that I really wanted to keep playing in the long run. I liked jazz and I liked Indian music, and I had found my essence of music in percussion, but I realized that wadaiko was my world and the sound that I loved the most. I realized that I most of all wanted to give expression to that first shock I had gotten from wadaiko, the impact of the sound, the pleasure of being swept away in its flood of sound. So, I started a band with shakuhachi flute, shamisen, bass and my wadaiko. I also participated in the forming of the wadaiko ensemble “Tokyo Dagekidan” and I did my first solo concerts around this time. This was also when I borrowed 15 million yen to buy a large taiko drum, as a sort of statement of my determination to pursue wadaiko in earnest. A loan is something you have to pay back and I was full of the desire to perform as many stages as I could. There are not any real producers in our segment of the music world, so I had to write the proposals myself and then sell the plans. I also called on other people to do some fun productions and acted as producer for a wadaiko festival and live performances. You learn a lot from planning events like this, and you meet new people and in the end this helps expand the breadth of your music.

You are performing actively overseas as well. What has been the response and benefits from these efforts?

I think the 1990s brought an end to the age when you could introduce traditional arts just as exotic things from the Orient. Lots of performers have given concerts in the U.S. and Europe, so by now the audiences are tired of seeing wadaiko simply as a traditional art. It has reached the point where the people are now asking, “Is that all the Japanese drums can do?” From the visual aspect as well, it is hard to avoid presenting wadaiko as a form of traditional Japanese culture. But, if we can’t take it to a level where it can stand purely on its musical merit, it will not really be a valid introduction of Japanese culture. The wadaiko produces a long, slow sound that can be sustained. That slow and deep sound fits beautifully with the “slow life” mentality, and that makes it popular with people in the West today. Wadaiko groups have already been formed in the U.S. and in Germany. And, because they are not bound by the traditional styles, they are able to perform much more freely. We Japanese drummers have a tendency to be bound to the traditional styles in strange ways that limit our musical freedom. It is true that good [drumming] form produces a better sound and makes you look better as stage performers, and in fact I would say that wadaiko is 80% a performing art. But, I still believe that there are too many people who value appearances too much and cling to the traditional styles more than they should. Since there are so many wadaiko performers today, I think it is fine to try some really different things. People should try to create styles that are completely their own and only they can perform. In other words, what is necessary is a balance of tradition and innovation.

Artist Interview

A fusion of Japanese drumming and
Western music

The world of Shuichi Hidano

和太鼓と西洋音楽の融合

ヒダノ修一の世界

It seems that wadaiko music is at a turning point. What does the Hidano style seek to express or accomplish?

What I am seeking now, as a Japanese, is sound that achieves the highest possible level of pleasurable listening experience. To achieve this I am developing new methods of performance and also revising the instruments [drums] themselves by doing things like opening air [sound] holes in the drum body or stretching double layers of drum skin on them. Since the wadaiko is made from the natural materials of wood and animal skins, the condition of the instrument is influenced by the weather and climate. So, I got the help of an American drum maker to develop an “all-weather drum” that is affected as little as possible by weather changes so that it maintains sufficient level of sound quality in all types of weather and climatic conditions. You might think that a percussion instrument has less expressive capability than the instruments that play melody, but in fact the very lack of a melody or words to be sung means that there are less restrictions, which gives it the ability to be played very freely and expressively. I want to use my own methods to bring out that expressive capacity of wadaiko. I want to create sounds that people will hear and recognize right away that it is Hidano playing. The “donnn...” sound from striking the large taiko drum just once expresses everything inside me. And the audience hears it and feels, “Ahh, that’s a good sound.” That is my ultimate objective. That is how much I love the sound of wadaiko.