

The following is a translation of the interview article of Katsuya Yokoyama by the Hogaku Journal. (March 2009, Original text in Japanese, Tanaka Takafumi)

Ten years ago in June, Yokoyama collapsed in Germany. It was a stroke. He survived, but it left the left side of his body paralyzed. He had to give up performing ever since. In addition to a harsh rehabilitation, he found out that he had a kidney problem at the same time, which required him to take dialysis three times a week for the last five years. This interview is on his current thoughts on Hougaku.

What happened exactly when you had a stroke on stage in Germany 10 years ago?

I was invited as a guest performer in Freiburg, which is a sister city of Matsuyama city. I wasn't feeling well before the show. It was difficult to even get a sound out, so I found a private room to practice in and I practice hard for about 30 min to get into top form. I thought I had warmed up enough to give a performance but I was wrong. When I went on stage I collapsed from my chair. There happened to be a doctor sitting in the front row and he came up to the stage and helped me.

Were you conscious?

I recovered consciousness right away onstage and apologized to the audience. After recovering I went back stage. I remember asking my wife "Where is my left hand?" To this day my left hand is still numb.

You were in a coma for a week at the hospital. What happened after that?

I started the rehab and stayed in Germany for 40 days. The hospital was near the airport, so every time I saw airplanes fly by from my hospital window, I thought about how I wanted to go home.

Looking back on your musical career, how do you feel about it?

It's been 10 years since I collapsed. The last 10 years of playing I was mostly busy establishing the International Shakuhachi Kenshu-Kan. Now I feel pretty stupid for not performing more during that time. Playing was such a joy for me.

Kokusai Shakuhachi Kenshukan's foundation paved the way for the International Shakuhachi Festival, which developed into a worldwide event. What do you think of the Kokusai Kenshukan's activities now?

We should have done a lot more. When I was working to establish the Kenshukan, I spoke to many players about the project. No one was opposed to the idea, but at the same time no one wanted to join me either. So I felt I had to do it alone.

What was your initial plan like?

I hoped to create an organization where the entire shakuhachi society would get together and help each other more. I wanted to create a foundation or something like a non-profit organization.

You wanted to start this in Tokyo?

Yes. When I came to Tokyo (from Shimizu), I thought I had to do something here. The vision was stuck in my mind.

You were settled in Okayama and you purchased a closed-down school. Were you able to achieve what you planned?

It is hard to say, but it wasn't good enough. To organize the very first International Shakuhachi Festival (1994), it was difficult but I raised money from the city as well as gave up my savings for buying a yacht.

Your passion was so strong that you up and moved to Okayama.

I could do that because I had a dream.

I strongly believed that the shakuhachi would become international regardless of schools (ryuha) or nationality. I felt the responsibility for making Japan the core for this activity. Even if the shakuhachi becomes popular abroad, the roots of the instrument are here in Japan. Therefore we have a responsibility for showing the world what this is all about. It's a problem when everyone says, "I play the shakuhachi but I can't play honkyoku."

You have made a big contribution in your achievement of spreading koten honkyoku haven't you?

I'm really thankful that Tozan players also came to my workshops. I believe that the origin of shakuhachi music lies within the honkyoku, no matter which school you are affiliated with. These pieces are something everyone should study.

At the Sydney Shakuhachi Festival 2008, a lot of the koten honkyoku as well as modern music were presented. How do you feel about that?

I think it's wonderful. But the Japanese players must try harder to carry on this tradition, or we'll get our feet kicked out from underneath us. We have to avoid giving a performance that doesn't move the audience (as some performances at the WSF were). I have many students coming to me from abroad, but something is different about them. Because Japan is the origin of the shakuhachi, I believe it is our job to refurbish its authenticity. However, presently there are almost no players who I can leave honkyoku with.

So what is missing?

First, the number of shakuhachi players overall is very small. Also, you cannot accomplish anything without everyday training. You can never convince others with the honkyoku just by practicing it for a few days.

People's attitude toward honkyoku is immature?

They lack a sense of purpose. I'd like to ask each and every professional player where they set their ideals.

You introduced shakuhachi to the world through "November Steps." Many players are now performing it. How do you feel about that?

They come to me for advice. My answer to them is “Do not try to copy me.” Sheet music is written in graphics so variance is very natural. Tsuruta Kinshi fixed the music for biwa which made my playing somewhat steady, but it can never be the same. I understand that it must be difficult for each performer to play differently, because the first player’s influence always remains.

You promoted the Fukuda Rando works as well.

He is a genius. Some say he is childish, but simple recreation and relaxation is always necessary. Is complexity that noble? It’s totally out of the question. His work will live forever. If I didn’t become ill, I really would have liked to record his pieces again. Rather than expressing the Taisho and Showa era of romanticism, I’d love to have been able to express his romanticism. I listen to the CD many times and always think about how I would have played them again now.

Rando’s lyricism is unparalleled.

And yet, not tacky. Sophisticated modernism, so to speak. The same can be said about Kimio Eto (Ikuta-ryu Koto player) who should be recognized more.

You premiered Toshio Funakawa’s piece and promoted him. Isn’t he your close friend?

I took care of him (laugh). We used to eat in my room. He is a genius too, but not a businessman. He won’t charge pretty girls!

Do you play modern pieces differently compared to honkyoku?

I try to empty my feelings into the honkyoku. I have been trying to let go of my ego ever since I was young.

Rising above yourself, right? Have you reached there yet?

No. My ultimate goal was to play the honkyoku with jinashi shakuhachi, which I unfortunately never had a chance to do. I worshipped Watazumi-do sensei and wanted to play like him. However, we could never be the same, as I am only myself. After the lesson with sensei, I looked up at the cedar trees thinking “When can I get there...” and I couldn’t stop crying.

Was he that great?

More than you can imagine. One second he is emancipated from the world, but the next second he is superterrestrial. He was hard to understand and I was often let down by this.

Any advice for the current shakuhachi world?

...I’d rather not to say.

Do you still teach your students or go to concerts?

I teach once a month. I go to concert sometimes, too.

What is tough for you now?

That I cannot play. I still have dreams where I try to play but can't.

What entertains you now?

I enjoy listening to CDs every day. Besides Japanese music, I especially like Ruvimovich Heifetz. I was deeply impressed with the Violinkonzert e-moll op.64 by Mendelssohn in my youth. I like Jazz and ethnic music too. The singer Ofra Haza is fantastic. My current entertainment is music and food. I am fond of French salt, pouring some of it on steamed rice is tasty! /END