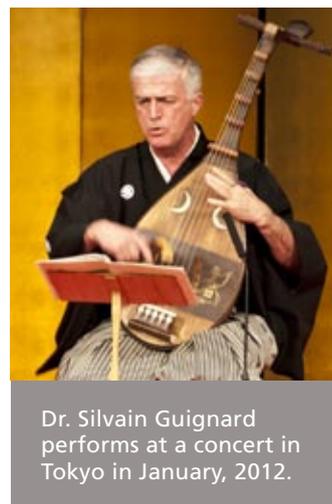


A Lifelong Journey with the *Biwa* Lute

Swiss musician **Dr. Silvain Guignard** is a master of the traditional Japanese musical instrument called the *biwa*. He is the only foreign musician to have studied under *Kyokusui Yamazaki*, a Living National Treasure who died in 2006. *Toshio Matsubara* interviewed the *biwa* master.



Dr. Silvain Guignard performs at a concert in Tokyo in January, 2012.

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At the University of Zurich in Switzerland, Dr. Guignard originally specialized in the music of Chopin. He developed an interest in the *biwa* after being strongly influenced by a Japanese music scholar who taught him about the history of Asian music at the university, virtually on a one-to-one basis.

Dr. Guignard explains, “What prompted me to start playing the *biwa* was my professor telling me, ‘If you study the *biwa* and traditional Japanese music and culture, it will also deepen your expertise and understanding of Classical Western Music. So why not get some experience in Japan for four years or so?’” He continues, “I also fancied studying something other than Western music, but I came to Japan not really giving it that much thought. I never imagined I would end up staying in Japan and becoming a *biwa* player.”

The *biwa* has a very long history and is alleged to have originated in Persia. It is said to have made its way into Japan via the Silk Road 1,400 years ago. It is a pear-shaped string instrument belonging to the lute family and has developed independently in Japan, evolving into several styles such as the Heike *biwa*, Satsuma *biwa* and Chikuzen *biwa* among others.

Dr. Guignard came to Japan in 1983 on a scholarship funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture. He began studying the *biwa* at Osaka University but, recommended by his professor to actually play the instrument rather than just study related material, he was then introduced to *Kyokusui Yamazaki*, a female *biwa* player regarded as one of the foremost experts of Chikuzen *biwa* music, who later became a Living National Treasure. For Dr. Guignard this was a truly life-changing encounter.

“My master was seventy-eight years old at the time and it was the first time she had ever had a foreign student, but she made me feel welcome. At first, it was hard because I didn’t really understand Japanese but she was a truly wonderful person both in terms of her depth as an artist and her depth as a human being. I was simply captivated by my master and she taught me for an incredible twenty-two years, until just before she died at the age of 100. She helped me discover the wonder of the *biwa*. For me, this was an experience I truly treasure.”

Unlike other instruments, the *biwa* is not just an independent instrument; it is always used to accompany the narrative of an ancient tale. The

biwa is an instrument for storytelling, so to speak. Dr. Guignard says this is undoubtedly the reason the biwa has so much appeal for him.

One of the major features of the biwa is that it has extremely rich expressive potential. The expression produced by the string instrument and the expression produced by the human voice merge into one, allowing you to produce deeper emotion than you can achieve in other music genres. The instrument itself has high frets and you can produce various pitches and timbres by slightly altering the pressure you apply to the strings.”

According to Dr Guignard, the biwa has a number of other features that set it apart from other instruments.

“The biwa is played very differently depending on its form and a master can only teach one form of biwa. The frets and shape of the plectrum are different, too, and there is also no interchange between performers of different forms. For example, the Satsuma biwa has the highest frets out of the various forms and you use strong finger pressure to express the fighting spirit of the samurai warrior. On the other hand, the frets of the Heike biwa are low and you just apply light pressure to the strings to

express the sorrowful world of the kuge aristocracy. The Chikuzen biwa I was taught has high frets like the Satsuma biwa and, by applying pressure more quickly or



Dr. Guignard's *biwa* collection. The biwa at front carries images of a *kabuto* war helmet and a bow

more slowly, you can produce a very wide range of timbres to express a range of emotions like sadness, gladness or heroism.”

Completely absorbed by the world of the biwa almost to the point of obsession, Dr. Guignard was one day told by Master Yamazaki in a biwa lesson:

“I have nothing more to tell you about the performing of this ballad. From now on, you must make it your own piece.”

This was six years after he had begun studying under Master Yamazaki and her words acknowledged the fact that Dr. Guignard had at last begun to develop as a biwa artist in his own right. Dr. Guignard says that, from then, it took him many more years to reach the point where he could give a truly convincing performance.

“It took me twenty years to understand what it means to capture the moment, to bring the body and mind into perfect unity to express musical substance. Art is by no means easy. It is a very long, arduous journey.”

Today, Dr. Guignard lives with his wife, Anne-Marie, in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture, overlooking Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake. He says it is a relaxing place that reminds him of the lakes in Switzerland and that the silence essential for practicing the biwa is also precious. While teaching music and art as a professor in the Faculty of International Studies of Osaka Gakuin University, at the weekend, he has a packed schedule of performances playing the biwa. His performances, which seem to well from within, have won acclaim, and performance requests continue to roll in. In April, he plans to perform at a large concert in Zurich. 

Toshio Matsubara is a freelance writer.