Volume 2 | Issue 9 | Article ID 2161 | Sep 21, 2004

Rites of String

David McNeill

Rites of String

by David McNeill

Mizushima Kazue has blended the world of avant garde experimental music and dance with an adaptation of a simple children's toy.

When installation sound artist Mizushima Kazue shows off her 'orchestra' in a makeshift studio in Tokyo, it is a shock to discover that the only instrument is what looks like a giant clothesline strung with thread and coffee cups. But then this slight elf of a woman slips on a pair of white gloves and begins to pluck at the strings of the clothesline, and a pitch-perfect version of the Beatles' 'Yesterday' fills the room.



The sound is so astonishing, you think there must be some trick involved but no, pretty much everything in the orchestra can be picked up from a convenience store: string, paper cups and buttons. The metal frame might stretch your journey to the local hardware shop, but that's as complicated as it gets.

It hardly seems possible to wring such beautiful music from something so prosaic. And that's before Ms. Mizushima plays an instantly recognizable extract from Four Seasons by Vivaldi. "Yes, people are often surprised," she laughs after the mini-performance for this reporter. "First they're usually very curious and ask me how it is possible to make such a variety of sounds with a simple child's toy. And even after they learn how it works they are still fascinated by string telephone music. Then they want to try it themselves."

Ms. Mizushima performs with her Stringraphy Ensemble, including five musicians. A typical eclectic set might include ancient Japanese traditional pieces, Western classical music and contemporary Japanese, Chinese and Western pop. But where did the 40-year-old artist come up with the idea of playing music on string telephones?

Her epiphany came over a decade ago in a forest, she says, but only after much wandering in the corridors of avant garde experimental music. She went through the standard apprenticeship for Japanese girls of studying the piano, which she found "difficult" before spending years experimenting with her own sounds, using everything from piano strings to metal trashcans. "I tried lots of things, including walking around a room playing the violin, but I found there is little room for development."

Her admission to the prestigious Toho School of Music in Tokyo was a bit of a poisoned chalice. "I had wanted to get into that environment for a long time and it's a good school, but once I did I found it rather

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466004000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conservative, with a lot of emphasis on playing classics such as Debussy. And I felt uncomfortable writing music for the piano or the flute, because those instruments are rooted in European culture and when I tried something new it sounded crude and sort of rootless. So I became interested in doing something more suited to my own milieu, and in what was going on outside the college, especially in experimental contemporary music, people like John Cage. But I also wanted to combine music with live expression and visual arts. I liked what was going on in theatre, in the work of Peter Brook and other directors."

In the early 1990s, Ms. Mizushima took part in an arts festival on a mountainside in northern Japan. "The idea of the festival was to perform with the natural environment. I thought that it would be wonderful if I could transform the forest into a giant harp by stretching hundreds of strings between the trees. I tried it, and this was the first time I played music with string telephones." Since then she has refined her original discovery, perfecting the sound and broadening and expanding her repertoire. Not as easy at it looks, she insists:
"You need musical training, and a lot of patience! It's like making a piano or harp. The logic is very simple but the practice, especially the tuning, is very difficult. The tone and so on comes from a combination of the length, tightness and thickness of the strings. And they have to be endlessly adjusted to get just the right sound." The stringraphy is played by rubbing and plucking the strings with the paper cups acting as tiny speakers.

The more usual route in the 1980s and 1990s for experimental performers -- making music using synthesizers and computers, of course crossed her mind. Indeed, she spent two years in California studying "computer music" before deciding it was not for her. "I liked Laurie Anderson and other experimental performers a lot. Their approach to sound was very scientific, but I became more and more interested in live expression, making live sounds. I like my current approach to music because it's more direct and I like to perform."
This emphasis on the visual makes each Mizushima performance a unique treat. Because the Stringraphy is, she says, "a spatial instrument as well as a string instrument," Ms. Mizushima spends a great deal of time setting it up differently in each venue, effectively transforming the stage into a piece of installation art. "I've performed at so many places over the years, including art museums, houses, school gymnasiums and hospitals, so I've have gotten into the habit of imagining what musical scale is the most appropriate when I visit a new place."



Her crew of musicians, decked out in flowing costumes, dance as they play, flitting across the silk strings of their giant instrument like Noh actors. Not surprisingly, the intensely visual performances strike a special cord with the very young and the handicapped. She tells the story of performing in a mental hospital:

"An aged woman with senile dementia suddenly began singing. Her voice was beautiful and convincing. I didn't want to interrupt her by playing the Stringraphy. When she finished the song and started for the second time, I started playing the Stringraphy with her. She began dancing as if she were playing the Stringraphy while singing. She suddenly looked much younger than she had before. I had never felt the power of music as strongly as I did then."

Despite her classical training and avant garde

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466004000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sensibilities, Ms. Mizushima brings a down-to-earth and contagious love of music to every conversation and performance. An animated and open woman who laughs a lot, she regularly bounces from her chair to illustrate a point by plucking out a tune on the Stringraphy. Her musical tastes range from the Hong Kong pop of Beyond and Eason Chan to Japanese superstars Smap and Morning Musume to her all-time favorite, Johann Sebastian Bach. It's interesting to learn then that at first, she refused to play pop tunes. "I felt that there was no point in playing conventional music on a newly created instrument," she says. "But so many people asked me that I relented, and the strongest reaction from audiences is often to those pieces."

It is this willingness to blend musical and cultural styles that has endeared her to audiences around the world, including France, Germany, Holland, Australia, India, Nepal, Denmark, Korea, Canada, and the United States, and which has earned her numerous awards including one from the International Society for Contemporary Music.

"The reaction is always good because this is the first time most people have seen something like this," she says. "Contemporary art and music is quite exclusive, and so there is not usually much response from the general public. But I found that with Stringraphy, people showed a lot of interest, perhaps due to the familiarity of the 'string-telephone,' and perhaps in part because it's also used in physics experiments at primary school. I find that ordinary people, not just those interested in classical music or art, come to my concerts once they hear what we do. That makes me very happy. And I've had many television journalists wanting to interview me, perhaps because my installations had a strong visual impact, which is not usually the case with musical instruments."

Audiences can look forward to a lively tour through Mizushima's potpourri of musical and visual styles, as well as a piece of music created specifically for them.

Stringraphy home page: www.stringraphy.com provides much information about the performer, composer and group.

A YouTube presentation of the ensemble is available here.

David McNeill teaches at Sophia University in Tokyo and is a regular contributor to a number of publications, including the London Independent and the Irish Times.

This is one of an occasional series on creative and engaged Japanese. Posted at Japan Focus March 19, 2005.

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that originally appeared in the South China Morning Post on July 25, 2004. Mizushima will give a series of demonstrations of her music at Bank Art29 in Yokohama, in March 2005. Details can be got by calling 81-045-663-2812.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466004000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press