

How I Got Roped into Taking Shamisen Lessons

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It all got started shortly after I joined the swimming pool. I usually swim about twice a week and I soon became familiar with some of the regulars. As people attempted to converse with me, they found out just how limited my Japanese is. My Japanese was based on approximately eight verbs, and if the speaker was not talking about liking, having, being, seeing, eating, drinking, coming or going, it's likely I wouldn't understand. Somehow, with some serious work at decoding on my part, I understood that one of my pals from the swimming pool was inviting me to his house to meet his mother who was a shamisen teacher. (Elaborate gestures played a big part in my understanding of the shamisen business)

I figured it would be a good opportunity to learn about Japanese culture so why not. So I met my friend's mother, an extremely friendly woman who talked fast and smiled a lot. Since she wasn't using any of the eight verbs that I specialize in, I just smiled back. They handed me the three stringed instrument that somewhat resembles a square banjo. Although at that point I knew nothing about the banjo, or the shamisen, or anything about making music for that matter, except that singing always sounds better when you are driving in your car by yourself.

So what I thought was just a one-time intro to the shamisen, turned out to be me signing up for weekly shamisen lessons. It took a while to figure that out though. There wasn't one speck of English spoken by anyone so I was on my own. It was kind of a reminder of why it would be useful to study Japanese while living in Japan. There were further offers to come over which I first thought were just polite gestures then I realized they really wanted me to come. When my teacher or her son would ask me to come over they would mention a big concert in November that the teacher's group would be performing in. I thought -sure I might check that, it could be neat and a cultural thing for me to see. I also understood something about a song so I figured the group would be singing as well as playing the shamisen.

Several months after my first introduction to the shamisen and several invitations from the shamisen teacher, I went to her house. It was then that she showed it to me. The schedule of the November concert - with my name in it. The initial shock and horror was followed by the realization that there was probably no easy way out of this predicament so I had better get going because I only had a little over a month to learn to sing. I was practicing several times a week and I recall of one Saturday in particular in which we practiced for 8 hours! It was brutal especially considering I was expected to sit on the ground in the kneeling the entire time. I tried to sit as neatly as possible but as my feet would go numb, I was like a five-year old with ants in my pants. When it came to the big day, I was dressed in a beautiful kimono and I got up on this stunning stage. I can't lie. I was horrible, but in true Japanese fashion, everyone told me I did a good job. I think that was because I wasn't as bad as they thought I was going to be. I know I worried them at the practices. It was quite an experience that will stick with me for a real long time. That's a good thing because I think my performing days are over.