

High school student dancers
Ikki Yanagida and Rino Matsuki



From Classroom to Ballroom

Ballroom dancing originated in Europe, but there are many ballroom dancers in Japan. We talked with two young people for whom ballroom dancing has already become a way of life, and to their experienced instructors.

ROB GILHOOLY

IT'S early evening, and Ikki Yanagida has already exchanged his school uniform for slick black slacks, silky shirt and shiny shoes.

With back bolt upright, he holds out his arms and with steely concentration steps, swerves and twirls through a routine until sweat drips from his immaculately coiffed jet black hair.

Soon those seemingly unmovable arms are occupied by his dance partner Rino Matsuki, and the two glide around the floor to the appreciative applause of onlooking students, Matsuki's poppy-red dress twirling away like some free-spirited car on a fair-ground Waltzer.

The pair, who are both high school students, are in

the midst of preparing for their next national contest in shako dansu – literally “social dance,” but more widely known as ballroom dancing.

Having competed in the Japan International Dancing Championships in June, their next challenge is another national event in August for high school enthusiasts.

“I practice every day for about three to four hours,” says Yanagida, who started ballroom dancing as an elementary school first grader at the prompting of his dance fanatic grandfather. “A couple of weeks before the contest, we are really put through our paces.”

The pair forgo post-school club activities and hanging out with friends to travel considerable distances and rehearse under the guidance of instructor Yoshiaki Uchida, who, along with his wife Yoshiko, operates a dance studio in western Tokyo.

The Uchidas know all about ballroom dancing. After teaming up as teenagers in the 1960s at their university's dance circle, they spent decades wowing dance fans at professional contests around the globe.

This year, their school celebrates fifty years in

Top, Dance school owners Yoshiaki (left) and Yoshiko Uchida; bottom, Students rehearse at the Uchidas' dance school in western Tokyo

operation, though ballroom dancing enjoys a much longer history in Japan, according to Yoshiaki Uchida.

What are today “standard” ballroom dances, such as the Viennese Waltz, were first introduced to Japan in the 1880s via an institution known as the Rokumeikan, a vast two-story building in central Tokyo that was constructed for high-ranking Japanese to mingle with visiting foreign dignitaries and immerse themselves in aspects of Western culture, including ballroom dance, he explains.

“The idea was to understand and practice Western culture, so Japanese could better equip themselves to engage with their foreign counterparts,” says Uchida, who is also vice-president of the Japan Ballroom Dance Federation. “It wasn’t until the 1940s and 50s that dance halls started to become commonplace, though they were not for ballroom dancing.”

The dances enjoyed there were more American types such as the jitterbug and be-bop, but as the Japanese economy grew and interests broadened, ballroom dancing started to find an audience among regular people, adds Uchida, who himself was first taught to dance as a 7-year-old by staff at his uncle’s bar.

That vogue gradually grew, reaching its zenith following the release of the 1996 Japanese film *Shall We Dance*, which tells of a life-weary salaryman’s trials and tribulations at a dance school he first notices as he waits for a commuter train at a Tokyo station.

Interestingly, the school in the film was based on Uchida’s own studio, which until relocation a few years ago was visible from the local station’s platform, he says. Film crew visited the school on several occasions, and some of Uchida’s students even made appearances, he says.

“In those days we only offered one-on-one lessons and after the film’s release we started getting long lines of people waiting for classes,” Uchida says. “It was the same everywhere. There simply weren’t enough instructors.”

Today that void has been well and truly filled. Uchida says there are 6,500 qualified instructors in Japan and around 1,600 dedicated ballroom dance schools. Meanwhile, according to government figures, the number of ballroom dancers aged 25 and



over in Japan totaled some 1.25 million in 2016. Some accounts suggest as many as 1.5 million Japanese dancers annually participate in contests, Uchida says.

These include high school student dancer Yanagida, who says his dream is to repay his revered instructor by competing on the international stage and then joining the team of instructors at the Uchidas’ school.

“Ballroom dancing is tough, not just learning the steps and all the dances, the waltzes, the rumbas, and so on, but the artistic expression that augments the music and moves the audience,” he says. “I can’t do that yet, but that’s my goal. I can’t think of doing anything else. For me, it’s no dance, no life.” 