



# An Italian Artisan Who Inherited the Traditional Craft of Chikuzen *Biwa*

Italian Doriano Sulis was charmed by the tones of the *biwa* (Japanese lute), and he has made and restored Chikuzen *biwa* in Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture for more than forty-five years.

SATO KUMIKO

The biwa is one of many traditional instruments that are still played in Japan today. The biwa is thought to have originated in China and before that western Asia and is similar in design to the ancient European lute. The strings of the lute are plucked by hand like a guitar, but the sound of the biwa is produced using a plectrum commonly made of wood and similar in shape to the leaf of the ginkgo tree. It is believed that a version of the instrument was brought to Japan somewhere between the seventh and eighth centuries via the Silk Road and then developed into its present forms.

There are five types of biwa still played today: the Gaku biwa used in *gagaku*<sup>1</sup> court music, the Heike biwa, the Moso biwa, the Satsuma biwa, and the Chikuzen biwa, which is usually

<sup>1</sup> Gagaku is an art form created between the 5th and 10th centuries through a fusion of ancient Japanese ritual music and dance with instrumental music and dance brought to Japan from China and the Korean Peninsula.

## Doriano Sulis at work restoring a Chikuzen biwa

used to accompany songs. However, the number of people who can make any of these biwa is steadily decreasing. In the case of the Chikuzen biwa, there is only one person who specializes in making this instrument, and he isn't Japanese; he is an Italian man, Doriano Sulis.

Doriano learned classical guitar at the national college of music the Conservatorio di Musica Santa Cecilia in Rome. He married a Japanese woman whom he met in Rome, and came to Japan in 1974, intending to stay only for a short time. After about six months, however, he heard the sound of the biwa on the radio, and his life was greatly changed.

Reminiscing about that time, Doriano says that he was greatly surprised by the unique and mysterious timbre of the biwa when he first heard it. He then visited the workshop of Yoshizuka Genzaburo, who made biwa in Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture, the birthplace of the Chikuzen biwa. Yoshizuka, who was designated as an intangible cultural property by Fukuoka Prefecture in 1975, was said at the time to



Doriano (left) in his days as an apprentice to Yoshizuka Genzaburo (right)

be the last Chikuzen biwa artisan.

When Doriano learned that Yoshizuka did not have a successor, he quickly asked to be his apprentice. In fact, he started training under Yoshizuka the very next day. Doriano learned how to make Chikuzen biwa from Yoshizuka for the next five years, and continues to practice Yoshizuka's traditional techniques. Following Yoshizuka's death, Doriano became the sole Chikuzen biwa artisan.

Doriano is now furthering his studies by acquiring old biwa made by various biwa artisans while continuing to accumulate as much related knowledge as he can.

Currently, Doriano is working hard at restoring old biwa, some of which are more than 300 years old. Different from repairing damaged parts, restoration is the work of returning the instrument to the condition when it was made as much as possible. According to Doriano, the difficulty lies in the fact that there is no standard for making biwa. "Chikuzen Biwa were made with great ingenuity as the artisans competed with their techniques. No two biwa are the same. That's why it's so interesting to work on restoration, guessing the creator's intentions.

Chikuzen biwa feature a body of hollowed-out mulberry wood with a paulownia front plate, and are strung with silk. Over the years, it has become difficult to obtain aged mulberry wood, and so Doriano procures the wood through the help of a friend. He sometimes takes intricate parts from older biwa. The restored biwa is finished with the application of a wax coating. The biwa that are restored in this way are all highly valued

as works of art.

In the winter of 2020, an exhibition was held displaying a collection of biwa that Doriano had restored, entitled, "Reviving Biwa: Doriano Sulis' Restored Biwa Exhibition." In the spring of 2021, Doriano opened the Biwakan, a private school to pass on the inherited techniques to the next generation. Currently, there are ten students from across Japan, and two of them have officially become Doriano's apprentices.

"There are subtle fluctuations in the tone of the biwa," says Doriano. "When hearing the timbre of the biwa for the first time, people tend to feel a sense of nostalgia."

For the biwa to survive, of course, passionate biwa players are just as important as skilled biwa makers and restorers. As a biwa artisan, Doriano's hope for his students is that appreciation of the biwa will spread across the world not as a unique or antique folk instrument, but as an instrument that can be used freely to play music. 



A beautiful old four-string Chikuzen biwa, one of Doriano's most prized possessions



Doriano in his workshop teaching students the correct way to cut wood