

An Afternoon in Imabari: a little music, a little ice cream, and a lot of new impressions

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I have just been lucky enough to watch the impassioned performance of one of Japan's current hot musical talents, Ms. Naoko Terai and her jazz quartet – whose music not only had an immediately powerful effect on my senses but also filled me with lasting impressions and new insights into Japan and Imabari.

At the invitation of a very kind shogakko sensei, I joined her and her two children for the performance at Imabari Koukoudai. This is an event which I would not otherwise have known about as for foreign residents such as myself with “sukoshi nihongo” we often exist in oblivion when it comes to awareness of local musical and theatre events.

For 90 minutes however, there was no distinction between Japanese and non Japanese speakers in the audience. Music: the universal language, unites emotional and cultural expressions without words.

This particular kind however was exceptionally appealing to me – jazz music that was diverse in style and tone. Throughout the performance, listeners experienced variety – Brazilian sambas, Spanish flamenco, American Blues ever changing from slow, emotive melodies to upbeat, swinging foot tappers. There was even a clever reworking of the love theme from the Godfather movie!

But for me the best thing about the whole experience was watching the four performers revealing their own personalities and nature. Without wishing to generalise too much, my experience of Japanese people on the whole has been one of a kindness, warmth and hospitality and often with this a reserved quiet shyness.

So for me it was a real privilege to see four talented Japanese individuals expose themselves in an emotionally candid way. Moved by their performance, it made me wonder why I often enjoy Japanese arts so especially. Music and other forms of artistic expression are a vital outlet for emotions not expressed daily. This is true for many cultures. However, I think perhaps that the distinction between how Japanese people are day to day and then how music and art is performed with such skill and intensity that I find Japan's artistic and cultural offerings particularly moving.

Initially I felt the customary self consciousness of being the only Western face in the room. However, the united feeling of the performers and audience tangibly affected the room – a feeling in which I was included.

After this experience, I hope that I can attend many such performances throughout my time here in Japan as I firmly believe that The Arts are key to promoting cultural understanding and international communication.

I therefore appeal to the people of Imabari to make such events known to foreigners whenever possible as often the kanji posters and incomprehensible flyers just swoop right over our heads.

However, I acknowledge this is not just a one sided responsibility. I also want to say to foreign residents – go out, explore, see what you can find.

After the performance, I cycled around Imabari buzzing with the music in my ears and I suddenly I felt as if I had spent the last 8 months wandering around with my eyes

closed. Places and sights which I had never noticed before now struck me. Quirky little jazz cafes, cosy restaurants and local shops just waiting to be discovered.

Spotting an inviting Italian ice cream shop that I must have walked past a number of times and never seen till now, I hopped off my bike and am now sat enjoying melon and mango flavours in a gorgeous little shop front writing this article.

Imabari, like often I find many places to be in Japan, has more to it than first impressions. There is life and spirit behind closed doors, hiding in nooks and crannies and waiting in the most surprising places. Just go and see for yourself.

