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Gen'ichi Tsuge - Interview with Mark Slobin

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Gen'ichi Tsuge: Can you see?

Mark Slobin: Yes, I can see you. How nice to see you. It's a long time.

GT: It is. Very. I thought we were to talk tomorrow morning our time.

MS: Oh, tomorrow morning. But you said Tuesday, it's Tuesday, oh Tuesday your time...

GT: [laughs] It's all right!

MS: [laughs] I can never understand this, I guess! Sorry about that. So, how are you? Are you good?

GT: Good, yes.

MS: Well, I'm just, this year I'm retiring finally, and I decided it was a nice idea to make some conversations with people from different parts of the world who came to Wesleyan and put it in the archives, because I'm hoping sometime someone will write the real history of music at Wesleyan. And they'll have some things, you know, some information. So it's very nice, I'm talking to people in China and Africa and England and Brazil and it's very pleasant, you know, to talk to everybody. So you were among the earliest, almost one of the very earliest students to come from outside the United States.

GT: Yeah, yeah.

MS: So how did you find out about Wesleyan? How did you know about it?

GT: Um, well, this is just a coincidence [laughs] but actually it was Bob Brown. Bob Brown wanted to have a person to teach Japanese music, this is 1966. But he was not able to come, so instead, you know, to Bob, "We'll find somebody who can teach Japanese music," but then he interviewed several people and I was in Tehran at the time. So Bob Brown came to Tehran.

MS: Oh, Tehran, right!

GT: To interview me!

MS: I think I was, ok.

GT: That was the very beginning. Yeah.

MS: Oh, I see. So he came to Tehran and he talked to you, you were doing your fieldwork for your dissertation, right.

GT: Yes.

MS: In Iran, that's in '66? '67?

GT: Well actually Bob came in '65.

MS: '65, wow.

GT: To see me in Tehran.

MS: I wonder why he wanted Japanese music. He had India and he was getting Indonesia, I wonder why he wanted Japan then.

GT: Well I think it's, in his mind, he wanted to have the East Asian music, and he selected Japan. Yeah, so, anyway, he wanted to have Japanese music, so I think he wanted to have me there in 1966, when koto and shamisen were beginning to be taught.

MS: Oh, ok. So you came in '66?

GT: '66, in '66.

MS: So how did you find Wesleyan? Were you surprised by the place? How did it strike you?

GT: Well, anyway, that was my first experience in the United States. So everything was very new to me [both laugh]. Yeah. But anyway, I think, when I went to New York, I took train to, you know, to where, to Middle...

MS: Meriden?

GT: Marty Hatch came to the Meriden station and then to pick me up.

MS: So then they found you a house, and...

GT: Yeah.

MS: You were supposed to be a teacher, you were not a student, you were a teacher?

GT: Well, I was appointed as a teaching assistant to be with, you know, two courses. So I was in a very strange position. So anyway, I was allowed to take a course, toward the Ph.D., but anyways, my obligation was to teach two courses.

MS: Oh, that's just the Bob Brown way. Right.

GT: Yeah yeah, so it was (unintelligible) but at the same time, very tough.

MS: Yeah, yeah. To teach two classes in English, and try to take some classes, too, of your own.

GT: But that was very beginning.

MS: Wow. But how did you learn English?

GT: Well, it was very poor. [both laugh] When I was in Tehran, I used to talk in Persian with Ella Zonis.

MS: Right.

GT: And Don Stilo.

MS: Right. I knew Don, yeah, I knew Don very well.

GT: Because my English was so bad, so, I used to talk in Persian with Americans!

MS: [laughs] Right, right, right. And then you had to speak to American students.

GT: Yeah. So anyway, that was the very beginning.

MS: So you were teaching history of Japanese music?

GT: Well, introduction to Japanese music.

MS: Right. And how did you find the students? There were some grad students.

GT: The students, well, the very first student was Steve Otto.

MS: Oh, Steve Otto, uh huh.

GT: Yeah. And Ed Garner.

MS: Oh, ok. Ed Garner, right.

GT: Here in Middletown. And somebody, Frances, somebody, yeah. But anyway. Well, I enjoyed, you know, doing this. With those graduate students.

MS: Did you teach undergraduates too?

GT: Well, I participated in the introduction to world music. Given by Bob Brown and David McAllester. And I did part of that course.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh, I see. So who else, it was just them, right? McAllester and Brown?

GT: Well, the introduction to world music was given by Bob Brown and McAllester, and I took a small part on Japanese music and Iranian music.

MS: And Iranian, right. But you didn't have a shakuhachi player, a shamisen player, there were no players.

GT: No, shakuhachi was added later, 1967.

MS: Ok.

GT: Yeah. Actually, this is a very memorable year. You know, 1967, shakuhachi began to be taught at the university for the first time in the world.

MS: First time in the world!

GT: Yeah!

MS: Amazing.

GT: Even in Japan, shakuhachi is not taught at the university. So Wesleyan was the first.

MS: That's amazing.

GT: Yeah. And at that time, 1967, Koizumi came. And he taught the (unintelligible).

MS: Oh, I see. In '67.

GT: Yeah, '67.

MS: And you had a shamisen player?

GT: Well, Namino taught, you know, to the Yamada school consortium. That means, that includes koto and shamisen and voice.

MS: Right. And when did Namino come?

GT: Well, 1966.

MS: She came with you.

GT: Yeah. It was the same year. But she came from Seattle.

MS: Ah, ok. With Garfias, right.

GT: Yeah. So, shakuhachi was added in 1967.

MS: That was a great time. That was before Africa, because Adzenyah wasn't there.

GT: Yeah, yeah. There was South Indian music and Javanese music. And Japanese music.

MS: Right, Asia, it was all Asia. Right. And 69 they added Africa. Adzenyah just retired now.

GT: Oh, is that so.

MS: Yeah, since 1969, right yeah. So there was a nice event for him. So, the place was very small, right, Wesleyan was very small then, right. And there was still boys, when you came it was all boys.

GT: That's right, yeah, yeah. [laughs] That is one aspect that I was very surprised. To see the United States for the first time, Wesleyan was a boys' school.

MS: A boys' school. There were no women graduate students, either.

GT: No, no women. But except a few were graduate students. Yeah, sometime graduate students,

girls, were allowed.

MS: Right. Let's see, Charlotte Frisbee, no she was gone already, right.

GT: Well, let me see. I remember Barbara Walsh. I don't think she continued ethnomusicology. Yeah. Let's see, at that time, very beginning...

MS: It's a long time ago. It's 50 years, right [both laugh]. So you were studying and teaching. Did it continue like that, you were studying and teaching the whole time?

GT: Well, let me see. Well, actually, it was 1969, I finished the coursework, so. Yeah, and then I did '70, when I passed, you know, qualifying exam, then I became sort of official teaching staff.

MS: Teaching associate and curator, I think it was. And then later, I think you became assistant professor later, right?

GT: Yeah.

MS: At the end, in the '70s, right.

GT: Well, after the completion of my Ph.D. dissertation.

MS: You completed, that was in '72 or something?

GT: '70, uh, '74.

MS: '74 you finished.

GT: Yeah.

MS: And then you left in, when did you leave?

GT: I left, 1970—let me see, '79.

MS: Oh, really.

GT: Yeah.

MS: So you were at Wesleyan 13 years?

GT: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Wow. So you didn't think you would be there 13 years when you came, right.

GT: No. [both laugh]

MS: So, were there, who were the other graduate students that you were, in your time?

GT: Well, let me see. Well of course, I was first, you know, Ph.D. student with Jon Higgins and

Viswanathan.

MS: Right, that's right.

GT: So three of us at the very beginning.

MS: Oh, yeah, well there was Kebede, the, Kebede was the first Ph.D.

GT: Right, he completed first.

MS: Yeah, in '71. And then Higgins and Viswa. It's a very nice group of people. [laughs] So, did you study, you studied other music then. Did you study Indian music and gamelan?

GT: I participated in gamelan and South Indian music. And of course American Indian.

MS: Right, American Indians. So you were singing Navajo songs.

GT: Yeah, yeah. That was a very good experience.

MS: So in the early '70s, all those other graduate students came. You had the other grad students came in the early '70s...

GT: Oh, other graduate students, Martin Hatch was there.

MS: But then you had Hartenberger and Becker, Bob Becker and Russ Hartenberger, and Shankar came, and Paul Berliner.

GT: Yeah, they came later.

MS: Yeah, those people came early '70s. But David Reck was there still.

GT: Yeah, David Reck, yes.

MS: Yeah, he was early.

GT: And of course David Locke.

MS: And David Locke. And Cathy, right. Cathy Read, right. So was Cathy. So who was, so the first student in Japanese was Ed Garner, right.

GT: Well, the very first one was Ed Garner. And let me see. Ralph Samuelson.

MS: And Ralph. Of course.

GT: Yeah, he just did his master's there. He didn't go through Ph.D.

MS: And then who else? Well then Cathy Read.

GT: Cathy Read, yeah.

MS: She did koto. Huh. So what did you think of the philosophy of the department? Or how did—it's very different than Japan.

GT: Well very new but very good. If I look back from now, I think Wesleyan was very innovating, at that time, you see. So now that there are many people doing this, world music, and similar activities. But in 1960s and '70s, Wesleyan already did many things [both laugh]. Which is not very common and popular. So in that sense, yes.

MS: So, then the composers started coming, right. You had Alvin Lucier and...

GT: Yeah, yeah. Of course there was John Cage was at Wesleyan. Of course Alvin Lucier, yeah, and later, who's the pianist and composer from...

MS: Jon Barlow? Or Neely?

GT: Neely Bruce!

MS: And Jon Barlow.

GT: Jon Barlow. In fact, Jon Barlow was also (unintelligible) he came in with me, I mean the same year, 1966, yeah.

MS: A very original thinker, right.

GT: Yeah, yes.

MS: So did you, you didn't do any work with composers?

GT: Composers, not particularly, no.

MS: Right. Huh. So, um, the shakuhachi players used to come only for one year, right.

GT: Pardon?

MS: The shakuhachi players would come, just, usually, for one year because they had to go back?

GT: No, no. After the year when Goro Yamaguchi left, Kodo Araki. But he stayed there for three years.

MS: That's right, he stayed longer. And the shamisen players.

GT: Well, uh, not shamisen players, but koto players.

MS: Koto and shamisen, yeah.

GT: Yeah. After Namino, um, Arami....no no no. Takano. A male koto player. I don't know if you know him.

MS: No, I don't remember him.

GT: Takano and his wife taught. Then Arami came.

And Ichimuro came. And then Namino came back. So, there were quite a few Japanese musicians.

MS: Yeah, it's hard for them to stay very long, because they have the, they have to work in Japan. So the last year, so, then you left in '78?

GT: '79, yeah.

MS: '79, you stayed till '79, right. And then, you decided to go back, or we stopped having the position? I think. Or...

GT: Well, I decided to go back, yeah, yeah.

MS: And then you became a faculty, professor in Japan.

GT: Yeah, yeah, Tokyo College of Music.

MS: Right. So what was the influence of Wesleyan later for you?

GT: Pardon?

MS: What was the influence of Wesleyan when you came back to Japan?

GT: Well, not a great influence, in a way, I was very Americanized. [both laugh]

MS: Oh, ok.

GT: But the course of the music was very useful and I think it was integrated to a certain extent in Japan, too.

MS: Uh huh, uh huh. Because we had it here, it influenced some of the Japanese thinking.

GT: Yeah, I mean, that is not mere ethnomusicology. It includes, you know, Western music. In that sense it was real integration, I think.

MS: Huh. And your teaching, how did you use the Wesleyan ideas in teaching?

GT: Well, in Japan, I used to teach ethnomusicology and history of Asian music. And world music. So that was different, you see. We don't, you know, we don't use the concept of historical ethnomusicology. That is very odd and strange idea. So we have history of Japanese music, history of Asian musics, and ethnomusicology.

MS: So it's a different system.

GT: Yeah, different system.

MS: Yeah. So, are you still in contact with people from Wesleyan?

GT: Let me see. You know, since I saw you last, that was 19...

MS: About ten years ago.

GT: 2000. About ten years ago.

MS: Right.

GT: So, actually, David Locke, and Cathleen invited me to teach at Medford.

MS: That's right. Well, so many people have died. Jon Higgins died, Viswa died.

GT: Yeah, yeah.

MS: So. There are not too many people. Well, Marty Hatch is still there, right. But he retired.

GT: Sumarsam is there?

MS: And Sumarsam is still, yes, yes.

GT: I heard about when Sumarsam came, actually at that time, you know, we had committees, various committees to find new artists-in-residence. And Marty Hatch introduced us to Sumarsam and he immediately (unintelligible) Sumarsam. So that is the very beginning of Sumarsam.

MS: Right, right, in '72. So yeah, he's still active, and Harjito. But the other people are gone. Viswa, Ranga. Yeah, they're gone. '78, so. Well, it was very hard for us to lose Japanese music. I still miss it, you know. It was so nice to have it there. And now, you know, we almost never have anything. But it was really nice to have those concerts, you know. And Namino was such a great musician. And we had Kishibe's daughter, too, right.

GT: Ah, yeah, she stayed in the third year...

MS: Oh yeah, did she continue?

GT: Well, still, she's playing but well, I don't know. There are many, you know, professionals, so.

MS: Right, right. So, so you kept being a student and a teacher all the way through '76, you were a student and a teacher, right.

GT: Yeah.

MS: And that was a complicated period for the politics in the department, right.

GT: Yes, yeah. Yeah. But sometimes very interesting.

MS: It was interesting.

GT: Exciting! [both laugh]

MS: Exciting, right. So were, did you, were you on the side of the students or the side of the teachers?

GT: Well, both, yeah.

MS: You were on both sides, so it might have been difficult for you to.

GT: Yeah, and also to, the side of foreigners, I mean.

MS: Right, and the side of the foreigners, right. Well, Ted Grame was there, right.

GT: Yeah, that's right.

MS: And Ted was...

GT: What happened to him, do you know?

MS: He died, he died.

GT: He died!

MS: Oh yeah.

GT: Oh, I see.

MS: A while ago. And he was very angry all the time, right.

GT: Yeah, yeah.

MS: I don't know why he was so angry. But he was angry. [both laugh] But that was the time, for people to be angry, in the '70s. So are there other things that you think about Wesleyan? Your experience?

GT: Other things, let me see. Well, when I spent one year in Medford, in Massachusetts, and Harvard. And in a way, Wesleyan's very unique, but after Wesleyan, it's a small small university in comparison with other schools.

MS: Right, Harvard, Tufts, right.

GT: At the same time, the university, because of its size, Wesleyan can do some things very, you know, revolutionary.

MS: Exactly.

GT: That is a good thing.

MS: Yeah. There's not so much control, yeah, right. That's an advantage, right. Yeah. So, well, those are the kinds of things I just wanted to hear about, you know. About, you know, your experiences. You were a pioneer. [laughs]

GT: Well, you know it's nice, very lucky to be there, at that time. That is very good exciting time.

MS: Yes. Good, good. Well, yeah, I don't know if you have anything else to think about but that's basically the story.

GT: By the way, do you have still Japanese language program?

MS: Uh, yeah.

GT: Oh, ok. You do.

MS: Yeah. But of course, there's more emphasis on China now. And after Su Zheng came then we developed a Chinese area. But we have some good grad students from Japan. We have an excellent one now, Maho Ishiguro. And she's in Indonesia, she's a specialist in Indonesia.

GT: I see.

MS: She came to America and went to college here, and she's very good. But she knows some Japanese music. I think we had, yes, and Junko Oba. And she, Junko Oba, became a professor, she's at Hampshire College. And she, uh, she did her dissertation on Japanese music. Recently. So sometimes we still have some Japanese grad students, but not too many. But we don't get to performance because we don't. Well, we had koto for a long time, with the different people came, but the university stopped giving money for koto. We had Mrs. Sawai, what's her name, Sawai...

GT: Yeah.

MS: And she gave us these kotos and she paid for koto teachers for a while.

Yeah, but she expected the university would continue paying for it, but the university didn't. So she was disappointed. But we have the kotos [laughs] We have some kotos from that. But no, we don't have the opportunity to teach Japanese anymore. The students like taiko. Taiko is very big. So taiko drumming is very big, lots of students want to do taiko. And when Barack Obama came, before he was elected, to give the commencement address at Wesleyan, and then we had the taiko band playing, and he was very impressed with our taiko band. [laughs] So taiko is very strong. But it's just a teacher who comes from New York or something. But a lot of students want to do taiko. The American, you know, the American taiko. So that's the only Japanese we have, really, is taiko drumming. But it's something. So. And Ralph came up last year and did a very nice project.

GT: Ralph?

MS: Yeah, he came and he visited and talked and played about, he gave a talk.

GT: Samuelson?

MS: Yeah. That was very nice. He worked with a dancer, do you know Eiko, Eiko and Koma, those dancers?

GT: No, I don't.

MS: Oh, they're Japanese, they're very famous in New York for Japanese, they do very modern style of dancing. And she has been teaching for years, Eiko, at Wesleyan.

GT: Hmm.

MS: But usually not with Japanese music. But for this dance, they brought Ralph and he played, so we had him. It was very nice. Well, it's good to talk to year.

GT: Yeah, yeah, it's nice talking to you.

MS: I hope you visit again sometime.

GT: Yes!

MS: I never went to Japan.

GT: Good, so now you're free, you retire. Well, I hope to see you.

MS: Ok, let me know if you come to New York! Ok, all the best wishes.

GT: Ok, yeah.

MS: Bye bye.

GT: Thank you.

MS: Bye bye.

GT: Bye.