

PoiL Ueda

Traditional Japanese satsuma-biwa playing and Buddhist chants find a surprising congruence with prog freakouts

By JR Moores

On paper it doesn't seem the likeliest partnership. In one corner of the musical world is Junko Ueda, who specialises in the ancient Japanese arts of acoustic satsuma-biwa playing, epic storytelling and Buddhist chants. Then there is PoiL from Lyon, known for their loudly amplified, bass-heavy and hyperactive prog rock in the more (post)modern lineage of Guapo and Mr Bungle.

Ueda was surprised when back in 2018 she received what's remembered as a "very polite email" from PoiL keyboardist Antoine Arnera. Curious to hear what she was being asked to participate in, she clicked on the link to PoiL's music. "And what I heard was a mass of power and energy," she says, "virtuoso rock music but avant garde and very fast." At first it seemed totally at odds with her own discipline. "What do I do with this?" she asked herself. "My music has a lot of silence. It is very formal and traditional."

She detected some kind of shared spirit, however, and impulsively signed up. Thus PoiL Ueda was born. After sharing ideas and rehearsing remotely through lockdown, the five musicians met in person to thrash out their self-titled debut album in a week-long frenzy. Arnera enjoyed the deadline constraint because it left little time to fret about whether the collaboration was actually working or where lay the boundaries between the ancient and contemporary.

The result should not be considered a "fusion", he insists. Rather, "It's like we have Junko's voice and her biwa floating in the air and our music whooshing around it. The voice of Junko is very sobriété [sober], without many changes, and our music is quite the opposite. We tried to change the colours of the music and compose our patterns while respecting the melodies, keeping all the tempo, and maybe the ma."

"Ma [間] is the most important essence in Japanese traditional music," explains Ueda. "It is like timing, but it also means space. In the traditional Japanese musical score, there is no indication about rhythm and timing. You have to learn this from oral tradition and from your teacher by listening only. After you repeat something a thousand times and you get more experienced, you build up this ma timing. You

can be a virtuoso or a beautiful singer but if this ma is not correct, it doesn't work. I felt the PoiL members immediately understood this. They didn't break this ma in my music. This is why I fitted quickly and naturally into their music."

The LP consists of two multipart pieces. "Kujō Shakujō" is built around a 1200 year old shōmyō chant. It honours the shakujō, a percussive instrument with metal rings attached to the top of a stick. Monks would carry this into the mountains when completing their training to ward off dangerous animals and expel their own internal bad spirits. PoiL Ueda use it to open all of their concerts.

"Dan No Ura" derives from the *Heike Monogatari*, an epic tale which recounts the 12th century power struggle between the ruling aristocratic Heike clan and – spoiler alert – the eventually victorious Genji samurai. "Yes, we had quite the same history," says Arnera when contemplating the parallels with certain events in his own country's past. "Not with samurai, but a similar resistance from the people. Maybe in every part of the world we have the same kinds of stories concerning power, no? We are still manifesting, this time against Macron."

He is speaking on the same day Bordeaux's city hall was set ablaze in protest at the French government's planned rise in the pension age. "For me it feels like despotism. He wants to make some laws. The people don't want them

but they do it anyway. They can do what they want because it's like there is a black hole in the legislation. We have to change it. But I don't know if that will be possible."

Perhaps hope can be found in the moral of the *Heike Monogatari*: everything in life is impermanent and no power is eternal.

PoiL Ueda remain a going concern with plenty of tour dates lined up and future albums planned. "I am very happy because there is a new audience I would never have met without this project," Ueda says of performing to the kind of avant rock fans more usually found weighing up the different eras of King Crimson or passionately debating the best Primus side project. She's had to get used to working with amplifier stacks and ear monitors, while PoiL have curtailed some of their wackier tendencies. "It is the first time we have not used much humour in our concerts because the subject matter of the music is more serious and we don't want to jump around wildly," notes Arnera. That said, neither party believes they have compromised anything.

"It's two worlds together," concludes Ueda. "I've always thought that tradition should not happen behind closed doors. The traditional should have the desire to contribute to the society not of the past, not in the museum, but of this moment. I think that is very important." ○

PoiL Ueda's *PoiL Ueda* is released by Dur Et Doux



PoiL Ueda: (from left) Junko Ueda, Guilhem Meier, Benoît Lecomte, Antoine Arnera, Boris Cassone