

Ryoichi Hirano

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 9 March 2016

After a slightly delayed start to the meeting, Ryoichi began by telling us of his background in Japan. His mum is a ballet teacher and has a school in Osaka, his father is an architect and his brother, who is almost three years his senior, was till recently with the National Ballet of Canada dancing principal roles. He started dancing before Ryoichi who thought he could do just as well. There was lots of pressure as the ballet world is quite small in Japan and they knew lots of teachers who were urging Ryoichi to out-shine his brother. He felt he didn't need that pressure though it does encourage you to do better. At home, Ryoichi went to an ordinary school and took ballet classes in the evening as well as rehearsing for competitions which are a big thing in Japan. They gave school performances twice a year and just rehearsed one solo. The biggest thing for him was the Prix de Lausanne where his brother had been a finalist. As opportunities were limited in Japan, Ryoichi knew that if he wanted to be a professional dancer he would have to go abroad to Europe or elsewhere to see what real ballet was and experience it for himself, and the Prix was the easiest way to achieve this. Speaking no English and having no proper ballet tuition it's really hard to get into a company.

He was about 17 when he went to the Prix de Lausanne and thought it was fun. His mum and teacher weren't allowed back stage to give advice or coaching but they had teachers from all over the world and did classical and contemporary work. He was coached by his chosen choreographer which was great, particularly as he didn't have his mum mouthing at him all the time! He met so many people from Japan and other countries and to be coached and taught by amazing people was a wonderful experience. The only thing he didn't enjoy was the hideous rake of the stage. He still remembers the feeling when he saw his name on the list for the finals when he burst into tears. He'd always followed his brother, who had reached the finals, and now Ryoichi had reached the same level. It was the most emotional day of his ballet life. He danced *Sleeping Beauty* Act

III solo and a modern piece. Two years ago he had the opportunity to dance *Sleeping Beauty* on the stage of the Royal Opera House which was amazing as that solo was the whole reason he is here and he told Monica Mason how emotional and exciting it was for him. She used to be the boss and now she is a good friend. Ryoichi came third in the Prix but he wasn't worried about not winning the gold medal (the winner went to San Francisco) as all he cared about was the scholarship!

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In 2001 during Ross Stretton's tenure as director, he was the first dancer to get an apprentice scholarship to the Royal Ballet. He celebrated his birthday at home on 5th September, travelled to London on 9th and started in the Company on 10th September. He spoke no English, knew no one, didn't know where to go, had his photo taken for the ROH pass and didn't know what to do with himself. He'd been used to going to school, doing his ballet, going home, going to bed but here there was nothing like that. He tried to study the language so he could communicate with his partners and with Chris Saunders or Christopher Carr, who were teaching. He watched a lot of DVDs and films with English sub-titles. At that stage the Royal Ballet didn't really know what to do with apprentices. He was general cover for the corps, but it was all very difficult. He got funding from the Prix but it was minimal, for performances he was paid as a student and the system hadn't been properly worked out. At the time he was just happy to be here but, thinking back, it could have been managed better. Now it's improved a lot.

Ryoichi recalled the first studio rehearsal of *Onegin*

with Christopher Carr as rehearsal master. Ryoichi was general cover for about 18 men. One day someone in the front line was sick and Christopher pointed him out saying 'how do you pronounce his name?' and Ryoichi went in with no problem as he remembers things easily. After that Christopher christened him 'heavenly Hirano' and addressed him as 'Heavenly'! That became his first experience of the Opera House stage but his first time on stage with the Company had been in Spring 1999 when they were touring in Japan. He was 15 and a teacher friend of his mum said extras were needed for the Osaka leg of the tour and it would be good experience. He went for it, was picked and appeared in *Manon* Act II as a boy at the back and beggars in Act III. Now he's done several roles in *Onegin* and finally took on Gremin. It is one of the hardest pas de deux as everything is so low and seamless, so it's very tough. He first danced it with Mara Galeazzi, who was very helpful and saw some talent in him. She pushed him and told Monica she wanted to dance with him. So that gave him recognition in the company. By then they had lots of experience together and it went well but Ryoichi was still young (25) to play an older, sophisticated man which made it a challenge. He had seen some older guys doing it for the first time so it was a nice feeling to be chosen and showed he was appreciated as an actor and partner.

Initially in the company Ryoichi had lots of spare time as he was only cover for most of the shows. Then he did *Onegin* in the middle of the season and after that he started being seen as a company member. For the first few months he was doing class, and rehearsals at the back to learn steps and going to the gym. Then he was injured in the season before Christmas and Monica Mason, who was the rehab coach, saw him as having something for the company and spoke to Ross about him. At Christmas there was *Nutcracker* and his mum and dad came to see the show as they didn't know if it might be the last chance to see him at the Opera House. He was standing under the arches near the back during the pas de deux. Two days later Monica called him in for a chat and said 'I have your contract so you can stay next season'. What a Christmas present! His mum cried and it was very emotional. His first year they did a long tour to Australia which was a new experience for him.

That season Ross left and Monica became Acting Director. Ryoichi doesn't remember much from the first year except that it was difficult. He started to understand the language and was trying to fit in and understand the system but work wasn't coming with it. He found it very difficult to fit in and living in that situation with tough competition is hard. It might have been a disadvantage being tall in comparison to the shorter dancers. Once he talked to Monica saying wanted to do the beggars in *Manon*, a role Rupert had done but she didn't see him as the beggar, he was more high class. So he was always at the back rather than dancing roles. The first thing he

did was the Lilac Fairy cavalier in Monica's production of *Sleeping Beauty*. He tried to be patient and wait his turn and everyone was waiting but Ryoichi knew he had to be prepared and wait until he was given the chance. The first three years, it was hard to keep going and he did think about leaving. People said he shouldn't waste his talent. Several colleagues – Tamara Rojo, Carlos Acosta and Zenaida Yanowsky – asked what he wanted and he said 'to dance'. Others said it was the quality, not the quantity that mattered. But it's a privilege to be with the Royal Ballet on the Opera House stage and not in a small theatre in the middle of nowhere, so he decided to hang around.

His first principal role was the Prince in *Prince of the Pagodas*. He also did the Black Knight in *Checkmate* which was in the First Artist category. After six years

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in the corps, he was a year as a First Artist doing what he had to do before becoming a soloist when he covered a lot more roles through being a reliable partner. He doesn't know where that ability comes from though he is quite laid back and relaxed and calms down his ballerinas! He also did a lot of Wayne McGregor's work because Mara asked for him. He did some Ashton works – white couple in *Patineurs*, and Jeremy Fisher which was probably his first solo! His role in *Pagodas* came, as often seemed to happen, because he was covering when Rupert went off probably because they were a similar height and type. Monica called him to rehearsal and within a week he was told he was doing the show with Lauren Cuthbertson. Then Lauren was injured during rehearsals but Monica really wanted him to do the show so put him with two girls, like an audition, and he ended up partnering Beatriz Stix-Brunell who was very young and had even less experience than Ryoichi. They had two or three weeks before the show and worked a lot on it with Jonny Cope. When it came to the curtain call at the end of the show he could hardly believe that he'd done it. He concentrated and lost himself completely in the role for the first time. It was a big deal for Ryoichi to be in the revival of *Pagodas*. The Japanese media were talking about him and saying he was their first prince in the Royal Ballet which put added pressure on him. Teddy Kumakawa hadn't done princely roles at the time though he does now in Japan. Ryoichi didn't want it to be a one-off and always wants something to happen down the line to further his career. His mum came for *Pagodas*. Although his dad isn't a big fan of dance he is

a great man and though he doesn't say much he's always been very supportive. As a dancer Ryoichi doesn't look up to any one individual but takes the best from many dancers. However, he does look up to his dad who is so understanding and who'll say something doesn't look good without realising just how hard it can be, but his comments are always valuable. He's almost as big a teacher as his mum. Amongst the audience not everyone knows just how hard the dancers work to make a performance look good but if it looks bad it is bad.

More recently Ryoichi had the opportunity to dance *Song of the Earth*. He'd been one of four guys at the back concentrating on his part which was a new spot for him. It was a long weekend and he was away in Brighton when he saw that Kevin had phoned. It was a Sunday morning which at first he thought was weird and so ignored it but then returned the call. Kevin asked if he was having a good time, said Rupert was off and would Ryoichi think of doing the role with Lauren the following Friday! This Friday, asked Ryoichi? 'Yes!' Ryoichi thought it would be amazing but was unsure if he was up to it as the stage call was on Tuesday. Of course he said 'yes' and returned to London after breakfast spending hours watching videos until late into the night. The following day a pianist came in and the two-hour rehearsal with Lauren went well. It was lucky that he was already in the production so was familiar with the music and what others were dancing. Tuesday was the stage call. Monica was coaching and said not to go full out but he thought he would have to see how to pace himself so he didn't stop and although it was a rough sketch they did it all. Everyone was happy and they worked on it again on the Wednesday and Thursday because the show must go on and he wouldn't let Lauren, the audience or himself down. He continued watching the video all night, counting in his head, and mentally doing the steps. It was a really good process even though they only had four days. The first show wasn't as good as he'd hoped but the second was much better and the third better still. He also did the shows on tour in New York when everyone cheered and he felt it a real achievement. He'd seen people panting, almost vomiting and dying afterwards but Ryoichi had managed it and felt he'd arrived.

Ryoichi has been in a lot of Wayne's ballets. The first time was in the joint production with the Royal Opera of *Acis and Galatea*. He'd not been able to do it in the end because of injury but felt he couldn't pick up anything and although he'd try his best he felt incapable of doing it. Wayne works so quickly and he felt he just had dust in his eyes and nothing came back to him. Although he didn't want to let anyone down he was second cast and told Monica he couldn't do it and there were others who wanted to and could do it better. Monica said he should be open-minded and must carry on – Wayne was a new choreographer so Ryoichi should give it another go. It was really, really hard work and

something very unusual with movements that didn't feel natural but extreme awkwardness is what Wayne sees as the beauty and art-form. Also it was difficult to pick up and recall the steps and you really have to think. He didn't get to do a show as he pushed his body which fell apart. After that they did *Infra* which was created on Mara and himself. Initially he'd been cover for Sergei who was first cast but at the second rehearsal he was working at the back with his cover partner and at the third rehearsal he was asked to step up and somehow he became first cast. It was an amazing piece of music and he's done it with Mara, Olivia Cowley and Natalia Osipova on tour and it became one of his signature roles. He will also be in Wayne's new piece, *Obsidian Tear*. He always finds it hard both physically and mentally as it's quick and almost like brain torture! You just have to try to remember it for the next time.

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This season Ryoichi is working a lot. He performs his first Albrecht in two weeks but there's not too much rehearsal at the moment. Over Christmas he was guesting in Norway for *Nutcracker* and *Giselle* and Cynthia Harvey's production of *Giselle* is only slightly different which is helpful. He did three shows and he knows he's capable of doing it. Kevin came to watch and was very happy and Norwegian Ballet was very happy too and it was a boost to his confidence. Dancers need a confidence boost. He's danced several times with Sarah Lamb who is very good and trusts him which is the best thing in a partner – they need to be able to trust the man. If a ballerina throws herself into him he enjoys it. He knows what he has to do and is capable to doing a two act ballet but the first act is very difficult fitting everything in with the peasant dance as there so many people on stage. Several times he had to stop but knows now what to do.

Also coming up are *Winter's Tale* in which he'll be Polyxenes, and then *Frankenstein* in which he's the monster. Every day is hard work, not so much with *Winter's Tale* but all day, every day for *Frankenstein*. Steven McRae is first cast but Ryoichi has to find his own monster and not simply copy. He always likes to find his own character. You do the same steps in the same ballet but with a character you can play around and he enjoys the acting roles. He loved the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* which they'd never do on the big stage but there are so many tiny details which make up the character. In *Frankenstein* the character is a challenge because he's

not just a monster as in the film but more human and almost child-like in that he does something bad to get attention. It's hard to put this across but you have to find a way of reading the character and showing that to the audience. He thinks Liam must see Steven and himself as weirdos!

In conclusion, David said it was a pleasure to interview Ryoichi at a time when his career is really taking off* and thanked him very much for an entertaining evening.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Ryoichi Hirano and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2016

*Ryoichi was promoted to Principal Dancer later in 2016.